THAT SUMMER AT LORDS

A novel designed for adults

by
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Family of Man Press

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Forward Note

1943
Boys were killing boys all across Europe.
Families were grieving in small towns all across America.
This is a snapshot
of one such small town,
the story told for adults
from the perspective of an eleven-year-old boy
who, too soon, was forced to grow up
and come to grips with
the ugly side of life,
That Summer at Lords.

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[Caution for younger and more sensitive readers:
The horror of war
is reflected in several
graphic scenes.]

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CHAPTER ONE:
How it was in Lords: Pop. 104

Ol' Mel – Melvin Winters, the oldest man in *Lords* – said it was so hot that summer the bees were sweatin'. As a brand new eleven-year-old, strugglin' to leave the name Mikey behind and embrace the more grown up, Mike, I had no reason not to believe old Melvin – about the bee's sweatin' at least. The war was ragin' in Europe and the Pacific in 1943 and most of the young men in my little Arkansas community had gone off to fight in it, includin' Frankie, my older brother. He had just turned 18. That both forced new responsibilities on me and provided a new sense of purpose – needin' to meet the challenge and fill in for him – *them*, really. Seven of the eight who were eligible, had either been drafted or had enlisted. From time to time it would require more of me than I had, but fortunately, I didn't know that, then.

It was Sunday. Mamma and daddy and I had just got home from church – a cooler, nine o'clock service in the summer. When I was in my good clothes – mamma made my suit from one of daddy's old ones – I had to ride between them up front in the pick-up. Why boys had to wear wool suits to go to church in the heat of summer I did not understand. I was pretty sure I could thank God for things just as well in a T-shirt, jeans and bare feet but mostly only me and Willie seemed committed to that take on things. Mother usually fixed baked chicken on Sunday. There were mashed potatoes and white

pepper gravy and beans or corn or peas dependin' on the season and always home baked rolls or biscuits. Sometimes there was pie or cake dependin' on the situation with our rationing stamps and the depth of our coffers, as my daddy termed it. When it happened, slices were larger now that Frankie was gone. I didn't really intend that as a good thing, understand.

Willie – Willie Purdy, of the Russellville Purdys – was my best friend. We were both eleven – him in March and me in April. I was an April Fools baby and had taken considerable ribbin' about it. Frankie told me I had three choices about that: fight it, ignore it, or embrace it. I did my best to do the embracin'. My thing was to say it was special because only one in every 365 babies was born on April first. Lots of kids didn't get it.

Bein' Sunday, when stores and such were closed, I was relieved of many of my responsibilities, so me and Willie were headin' to the creek with poles and a can of worms. We might fish. We'd get in the water for sure. Frankie, my older brother, said the swimmin' hole had been there through three generations, at least – maybe five. I wasn't sure how long that was but figured a good number of fathers and grandfathers had done their skinny dippin' and learned to swim right there. It was like a comfortable connection to the old days.

Ol' Melvin said there'd been a vicious Civil War battle right there – that the water ran red with the blood of damnyankees. I'm not sure if that's one word or two – around here it's offered up like one. When I think about that, it gives me the shivers – boys killin' boys right there in my special spot. I guess those things don't change. Frankie's off in the middle of all the killin' in Europe right now and there was WWI and the Civil War before that. The Bible speaks of countless wars – many supposedly fought in the name of God, of all things. Human beings seem to have a built in need to kill each other. History proves it. I don't understand it and Pastor denies it. If it was allowed, I think I'd stop attendin' Sunday services. Very little that the man says makes sense. I can't see how God's been takin' very good care of us since I was born. Willie says just don't listen to pastor and church isn't all that bad.

The fact that defeats the purpose of attendin' doesn't seem to enter his head. Willie's thoughts are often simple.

I remember Frankie was always in a hurry to grow up. I'm content to just take it as it comes. I figure there's a lot I need to learn before I'm grown up. In Lords, bein' one age was pretty much just practice to move up to the next age. Me and Willie had each made the move ten times. Boys had to be eleven to get to go to the swimmin' hole without an older boy, so Me and Willie was enjoyin' it for the first summer. It was like a wonderful feelin' of freedom. It wasn't like we had big secrets from the grown-ups, but it was good to know we could have if we chose to.

Like I said, me and Willy were best friends, partly because we were the only 11-year-old boys in town. There were three girls our age, but they were girls.

There were three more at church – farm boys – and five more in school. Our school sat on a hill in the country – lookin' east was Davis, south was Melville, and west was Yates. Lords was closest, just down the north slope. The four little towns and the farms in and around it shared that school – *Hill School* – not a very creative name I always thought. Me and Willie would have gone for somethin' more like *Red Belfry School* or *Lamp of Knowledge School* or *School of the Young Rebels* – referencin' southerners, not wayward youth. There were four rooms and four teachers – first and second in one, third and fourth in another, fifth and sixth in another and seventh and eighth in another. Come September, me and Willie would move up to the older kids' room – 7th and 8th. Teenagers went to Center Town to high school. A bus made the rounds and took them to and from – a lot of waisted time I figured. Frankie said he used it to do homework – I have the idea Linda Compton was a big part of that homework. Linda is a local girl all the older guys think is pretty. Willie and I are yet to get a handle on what pretty really means.

Between the two of us, we had one Blue Tick Hound – called him Ol' Blue because he was old and blue. He was too old to be a great huntin' dog. I suppose come right down to it, he was a better pettin' dog. It was a well-known fact among the kids in Lords that there was nothin' quite as good for

troubles as sittin' back on the bank of the Little Osage Creek pettin' your dog. It was good me and Willie had Ol' Blue, 'cause there was gonna be lots of troubles befallin' Lords that summer.

Mamma didn't work at the diner on Sundays and daddy only opened the fillin' station for travelers with emergencies. Frankie had helped daddy at the fillin' station Saturdays and late afternoons. So far, I haven't been required to handle it by myself. Things are pretty tight around here lately given rationin' and such. Gas rationin' really hurts us here in Lords. Lots of folks depend on the traffic that comes down route 27. Less gas means less traffic means less money spent here – gas, meals, supplies from the general store and overnights at the *Night Cap Motor Court*.

Just so you know, that's my daddy – tall, slender, pinstripe coveralls – pumpin' gas at the one-pump station there next to Gramma's Café, and it's mamma you see through the big window there, behind the counter in Gramma's – white dress and red apron. There is no gramma, in case you were wonderin'. I suppose there was once – my gramma Rakes, I imagine – haven't ever given it any thought. Mamma runs the place. She takes folks' orders, cooks folks' food and serves it up. Summers and weekends, I get to do dishes. She pays me ten cents a week durin' school and twenty a week, summers. Through the week I always think I know just how I'm gonna spend that dime or two, but then comes Saturday and I always have second thoughts about it. By June first, I'd second-thoughted myself into a fifty-cent fortune in the white, glass, chicken on the nightstand beside my bed.

Willie says it's 'cause I'm just bein' cautious. Tilly, short for Matilda, she's the one swingin' on her front porch – the two-story white house that sits back from the highway on down from the cafe. She hates bein' called, Tilly, so, we call her Tilly. About my money, she says I'm indecisive. Tilly wears glasses and pigtails and believes she's boss of the world. Me and Willie has told her no girl could ever be boss of the world, but she just puts her nose in the air and stomps off. She's got about the best stomp-off in these parts we're thinkin' – me and Willie. Not sure if that's an asset or not. Ol' Blue's never

offered an opinion about how I use my dimes. No matter how hard we try to stay away from her – Tilly, not Blue, he's a boy – she always shows up. Ol' Blue catches on faster than that – he knows when we need him and when we need to do stuff without him. I don't see why God didn't make girls as smart as dogs. Ol' Mel says Blue's about 70 years old in human years, so I guess he has a right to be smarter than Tilly.

That Sunday afternoon, we got right in the water. It felt so good – the cool of the water was *good*, but you could make it *great* by just standin' up in close to the bank and lettin' the breeze cross you're wet skin and make you even cooler. I asked my teacher about it, once. She said it was because when water evaporated off your skin it snagged up part of the heat, so it left it cooler. I'll give God credit for that one. If that's really true, you'd think on muggy summer days, just walkin' through that wet air ought to cool you down, but that's never been my experience. I wish God would get his act together about that.

Me and Willie are both good talkers – he likes to talk about himself and people – I'd rather talk about ideas and possibilities – but we still manage conversations.

"Nice to be free today, huh," I offered.

"I'll say. I'm gonna be busy this week. Remember that guy in the green Buick that spent some time here a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yeah."

"He bought the old Marky house on the hill south side of town."

"The *haunted* Marky house?"

"That's the one. My daddy got me a job workin' for him, cleanin' up the place – inside and out. Dad used to get Dave jobs like that. Been vacant for ten years, daddy says. I believe it – dust a quarter of a inch thick everywhere. I been sneezin' my head off in there."

"You're dustin' the place?"

"No. Mostly been draggin' the old furniture out back to be burned. Monday he's gonna show me how to run a big vacuum cleaner – dustrial, he calls it. Haven't seen it yet. Says

I'll probably have to empty it every fifteen minutes. That'll at least let me go out in the fresh air a couple of times a hour."

"We don't have much time to be kids, anymore, do we? Startin' Monday I'll be bailin' hay out at the Roland farm. How I'm supposed to take the place of their son, Tommy, I'm not sure. I hate this war in so many ways!"

"My daddy says it's good we're over there beatin' those krout's behinds for once and for all."

"You willin' to give up your brother, Dave, to do that?"

"Hadn't thought about it that way. Of course not. I worry about him a lot, you know."

"I know. Same with me about Frankie. I can't imagine him over there."

"What ya mean?"

"Franky's a kind, gentle boy. He spent a good part of his life lookin' after me – makin' my life good – mostly just because he wanted to, I'm thinkin'. It makes me want to throw up thinkin' about him killin' German soldiers. *Killin'* them, Willie, you understand that?"

"But they're Germans – they're bad."

"How can a 17-year-old German boy be bad enough to just aim your gun at and kill? And remember, they think *we* are the bad ones. I hate it all so much."

I shed tears over it right there and then. I kept my face splashed wet, but I'm sure Willie could tell. It posed another impossible dilemma: was I supposed to just suddenly turn off bein' an 11-year-old and stop cryin' when things made me sad – did I have to become a grown up without any time to sneak up on it – to learn how to be one? I felt like I was bein' judged that way – on how good a grown-up this little boy could be. I hated it, but I didn't dare show it – another unfair part of my life that summer.

We switched back and forth between swimmin' and fishin'. Between us, we had six keepers on the stringer by the time we left – good sized keepers. It would make supper at both our houses that evenin'. I grew up likin' to fish – men just liked to fish, so I did, too – I never questioned it. It was one of those things about bein' male that had never been my

decision, however. I understood there were lots more of them – runnin' races, climbin' trees, competin' in sprots – and still even more ahead for me. The past few months fishin' had stopped bein' 'for fun' and had turned into 'need to do it' – the family coffers thing. I'd really never been much aware of family finances before. I understood we couldn't afford to buy me a rifle, and I'd have never asked for one, but I mean in general – finances – butter and egg finances Ol' Mel called it. I had laid awake some nights wonderin' if I should refuse my allowance. I even asked God about it. Like usual, I got no answer.

My relationship with God was growin' to be pretty iffy that summer. I had some talks with Pastor. I asked him how, if He is a lovin' God, can He allow war. Pastor said God loves all men, but he doesn't make decisions for them. I asked if He really comes to people's aid when they ask for it. Pastor said 'yes'. So, I said, he'll come to Frankie's aid when he's trapped in a fox hole if he just askes. 'Absolutely,' Pastor said. So, if a German soldier in the fox hole 20 yards away also asks for aid, God'll protect him as well because He loves him, too. 'Absolutely.' So, if all the soldiers on both sides ask God to protect them, no soldier will get killed. Pastor didn't answer.

I tried it another way. Is God on the side of right? 'Of course, He is.' Is America right in this war? 'Yes, America is right in this war.' It sure doesn't seem like He's doin' anything to help the side that's right. He lets the wrong side kill our boys and even just ordinary people who get in the way. Do you see how I'm doubtin' if He can really be a lovin' God who's on the side of right and who comes to the aid of those who ask for it?

Again, Pastor didn't answer.

A few Sunday's ago, you preached about how God rewarded good people and punished bad people. I don't see any of that reward goin' on right now here in Lords. Ol' Mel says times are as hard here now as they were back in '29. I know for a fact the people here in Lords are good people – well, Butchy's questionable – but the rest of us do our best to live good lives. We take good care of each other. We don't let any family go hungry or want for doctorin' when they can't afford it, but God sure doesn't seem to be payin' any attention to any of that – sure ain't rewardin' us. Times just get harder

every month.

'Perhaps he is just testing our faith.'

That's the trouble with your religion, Pastor. When things go well in our lives God's smilin' down and rewardin' us. When things go bad, he's testin' our faith. The way you've set it up, God can't lose. Good times or bad, God wins out. Daddy says you're a really smart man, so you just *have* to think it's really stupid to believe that way.

Pastor remembered a meeting he had to get to and excused himself.

Before Franky left for the Army, I told him about some of my questions. He said not to worry about such things; when I got older, I'd understand all about it. I asked him if *he* understood all about it. He said no. I'm wonderin' if older people really get to the place they understand, or just get tired of askin' the questions and not getting' any reasonable answers, so they just give in and go along. As far as I can tell, none of it makes one whit of a difference in my life anyway. Bad guys keep hurtin' good guys. Sickness keeps killin' good guys. Hunger keeps afflictin' good poor people. Good boys keep gettin' sent off to war to get killed by other good boys. If I was God, things would be a lot different, I can tell you tell you that.

The upshot for me is that recently whenever Pastor sees me headin' in his direction he ducks out and hides. Sometimes, I do it just for the sport of it. From what I've been told, for doin' somethin' like *that*, God will punish *me*, but when Hitler invades the world, he doesn't seem to do *anything* to him. 'Be patient', Pastor says. If He could make Eve out of Adam's Rib – poor guy – in just seconds, he could stop the war in seconds if he chose to. I'm about ready to give up on religion.

I still say my prayers at bedtime. I figure the investment of a few minutes is worth it just in case there's somethin' to it. I especially ask for Frankie to be protected. I also ask that he never has to kill anybody. I'm so afraid if he has to do that, he'll never get over it. I know *I'll* never get over it just thinkin' about him doin' it.

Willie says I think about things boys my age aren't supposed to think about. He may have a point, but Willie's a bit simple minded, and I doubt if he really understands what I'm talkin' about in the first place. Of course, Pastor *isn't* simple minded, and he doesn't understand what I'm talkin' about, either.

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"You ever baled hay before, Mikey?"

"No, Sir, and I'd rather be called Mike if you can remember."

"I will try. Don't hesitate to remind me if I forget."

"Last summer when Frankie helped the Wilson's bale, I handled the water bucket for the crew, so I pretty well know how everything goes, even if I really never did any of the actual hayin'. Daddy's told me stories about his days living on the farm as a boy and how hard bailin' is, so I'm prepared for whatever it throws at me."

"I imagine you'll do fine, then. I had forgot your dad grew up on a farm, but I do remember, now, how folks were surprised when he chose to move into town and take over the filling station."

The gas station and café had belonged to grampa. The way I heard it, he and Daddy had a fallin' out over Daddy not wantin' to take over the farm when he graduated high school. Frankie said Daddy finally worked it out with his daddy and he came to town to run the fillin' station. When he got married, they started runnin' the café, too. Grampa's dead – so is grandma.

Daddy is 36. He could still be drafted into the army – it goes to 37. I worry about that a lot. I suppose if that happened, I'd have to drop out of school and run the station. I think if a man has a family he shouldn't have to go to war. Willie agrees with me. Even Tilly's with me on that one thing. Between that and Frankie already bein' over there, I cry myself to sleep most nights. I'm thinkin' after ten hours of balin' hay today, I should be too tired tonight for that.

I loved the smell of the freshly cut hay. Now *that* was

interesting. The *grass* didn't become *hay* until after it was cut – at that very second, I assumed. I guessed that made hay dead grass. I wondered if grass died the second it was cut. Like Willie said, I wondered about strange things for an eleven-year-old, but then death and dyin' was pretty much at the forefront of my mind that summer.

"You're a strappin' big boy for eleven. I expect you to keep busy today, but don't do anything that'll hurt you."

I smiled and nodded. How was I supposed to know ahead of time if somethin' was goin' to hurt me or not, and what was it about gettin' hurt? Nobody said anything about riskin' my well-bein' just helpin' out hayin'.

I shed my T-shirt, ready to begin work.

"You'll want to keep that on, son. Liftin' hay bales against your chest will cut your skin to shreds."

"Alright, then. Thank you for tellin' me before the shreddin'."

He smiled and handed me work gloves. They were too big, but I didn't mention it. I supposed that was just one more signal I was some place I shouldn't have had to be, doin' somethin' I shouldn't have had to be doin'.

At eleven o'clock, we stopped. Jane, his wife, brought sandwiches and fruit for our lunch. There'd been a water bucket and ladle in the cab of the truck the whole time. I waited 'til Bart – Mr. Roland – would take a drink and then I'd load up, too. The arrangement was that when you had to go, you just pulled things out and went right where you were. It was a handy arrangement and cost the crew almost no time at all.

Mostly, my job was up on the truck movin' the bails – that the men threw onto the flatbed – into a stack eight bales high. I figured out how to arrange them in steps, so I could accomplish that – risin' from back up to front. Bart showed me how to alternate them across the spaces in between, so the whole pile wouldn't fall off. Bart just offered out of the blue to help with the last eight. I'd been concerned about how I was to manage that. He was a very good man. It was the hardest work I'd ever done. I could tell Bart kept watch on me, but I

never let on how hard it was. The downside *was* how hard it was and how bad I knew my muscles would feel the next day. The upside was, I figured it was work like that, that their son Tommy had done, that grew him his muscular body. Frankie admired it, so I figured it was a good thing.

We worked until six o'clock and got the field finished.

"Took two hours longer than I estimated, Mike. Sorry about that."

"No problem, Sir. Must have been a really good crop."

He nodded and handed me a fifty-cent piece. It was the most I'd ever earned for anything.

"Thank you very much, Sir. Let me know when you have other work. Thank you very much."

I tried to act grown up about the money and not show how excited I really was. I hadn't thought about bein' paid. I figured I was doin' it to help out in Tommy's absence. It would nearly double my savings. As I ran home, I wondered if I should offer it to mamma to help with the saggin' coffers. By the time I entered the café to report in with her, I had decided that's what I should do. Fifty cents was a lot of money and I really had no need for it.

"Nonsense, honey. You worked hard for that money. You keep it."

She leaned down, wiped a spot clean on my forehead and kissed me. As a little kid I loved that. I had to wonder how I should react as a suddenly big kid. She never kissed Frankie in public.

The next morning, I thought I'd rather be dead – such pain I'd never felt before. It wasn't just my big muscles in my arms and legs, it was my fingers and toes and my butt of all places. It even hurt to open and close my eyes and stick my tongue out. A little kid could have complained or at least mentioned it. Since no little kid would ever be required to do what I'd done, I figured that pretty well closed the door on my childhood.

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CHAPTER TWO:
My People

With Willie workin' at the Marky House – and Willie was a good worker when he didn't have to make decisions – I had to find a way to otherwise busy myself. I made the rounds like I had when I was a preschooler.

I stopped at 'Ol Mel's house. He was usually in his rocker on his front porch. It was a tiny house – two rooms – big porch. Never knew if he spent so much time on the porch because it was so big or if he'd made the porch big because he liked to spend time on a porch. Frankie would call that a 'nowhere' question because it didn't matter to anybody in the world but me and had no way of movin' conversation forward. His take on it didn't deter me from havin' them – *nowhere questions*. My fourth-grade teacher had a take on it once when I was bein' teased for always askin' questions – it had made a profound impact on me: "Just because you know a question can't be answered is no reason not to ask it." It was a wise take on it, I thought. I often felt the kernel of answers start to build just because I had asked the question.

Speakin' of havin' *takes* on things, it was just about Ol' Mel's best thing. He had takes on everythin' and everybody. I liked his take on me: "Has a really good head on his shoulders – enough smarts and lots of common sense." I hoped he was right because I figured those two things would take a guy a long way in life. His take on Willie was: "Lord help him if he

don't find a good woman, and lord help the woman if she's the one he finds." It was probably true but thinkin' about it always made me laugh. O'l Mel was dead serious about it.

Mel wasn't outside, and I never bothered him when he was inside. He was very old and napped a lot, so I trotted on over to the café. My mamma's name was Doris Ann. Ol' Mel's take on her, sort of bothered me: "She's not happy with the lot her life's dealt her." Mel would never explain what his takes meant. She went to the University up in Fayetteville for a year, then, when her daddy died, she had to come back home. I heard she wanted to be a teacher. She'd a made a good one. I can see how things haven't turned out how she had planned, I suppose, but I hoped Mel was wrong. I knew she loved daddy and Frankie and me so *everything* about her life couldn't be bad. I'm sure she knew we all loved her. I probably didn't tell her often enough. I wonder if big boys do that. I can't remember hearin' Frankie sayin' anything like that. Daddy kisses her – just a quick nip to the lips – whenever he leaves or returns – at the house – seldom in public.

I can't understand that. If you love somebody and want to show them by kissin' them, it shouldn't matter where you are. It boils my blood, so I may mention it again.

Mamma was really busy that mornin'. I saw she was behind on dishes, so I did up a sink full. She smiled and threw me a kiss from across the room. I didn't dally, not wantin' to be under foot. I moved on to Aunt Connie's place. She was mamma's older sister and had converted the front room of her house into a combination Post Office, telephone office and telegraph office. She didn't do the dot and dash thing – but telegrams arrived in the mail and she distributed them. Well, Aunt Connie weighed like a zillion pounds, so *she* didn't distribute anything but her weight – that was pretty funny. It was probably unkind. She'd call folks, so they could stop by and pick them up. If they were impatient and the people wanted her to open them – the telegrams – and read them out loud, she'd do that over the phone sometimes. She promised that when I got *a little older*, she'd show me how to run the telephone switchboard. I was lookin' forward to that. I figured that '*a little older'* thing might shrink considering how

conditions were changin'.

Besides the half dozen or so empty houses in Lords, there were two dozen houses in good repair that took care of all 104 of us who lived there – actually, fewer now with the big boys gone. Be one more when Evy had her baby – she and James were expectin' any day – their first. James was in the navy, so he'd have to miss the birth. Everybody felt bad about that. Every house had a mailbox at Aunt Connie's and folks just came and went as they wanted – her front door was never locked. Well, none of the doors in Lords were ever locked. We were honest people and respected everybody's privacy. Durin' my lifetime, I can't remember anything ever bein' stole, there. That doesn't count Butchy Liphart – he was a bully and most everythin' else bad. He was fifteen and believed he was the baddest twenty-five-year-old that ever stalked the Earth wearin' a black leather jacket and motorcycle boots. He stayed with his grandmother. The story was, his parents kicked him out. I didn't know parents could do that. I'm glad it doesn't have to be a concern for me.

Back to Aunt Connie. I never liked the way she was so bossy. Before I turned six, I took her seriously and did like she asked. After that, I pretty much let things in one ear and out the other. I think Ol' Mel's take on her is right on: "She knows what's right for everybody but herself." I heard mamma talkin' to another lady once and she said she thought her sister was scared of men, so she gained weight just to keep them away. I'm not sure how much a person weighs should have anything to do with havin' somebody fall in love with them, but I'm just a kid – well, maybe. Who knows? Anyway, I doubt if unlovability is measured in pounds – it sure shouldn't be. "God are you listening?" Ol' Mel's take would stand even If she only weighed a hundred pounds. I have wondered if, since men don't like her personality, she got fat as an excuse – a reason – for them not likin' her. Another of those nowhere questions, I suppose.

My daddy is a real good mechanic – best in the county the men say – learned about it as a kid growin' up on a farm and had some special training when he got older. I see he's elbow deep into the engine of a car belongin' to somebody

who's just passin' through. I hope it isn't serious and won't hold them up for long. Probably, they were the couple in the café that I didn't know. Some would smile about it and say it was good for business – daddy chargin' to fix the car and mamma makin' money on the food. I think it stinks when bad stuff happens to people. That part is awful enough and then to have to pay out money on top of it – doesn't seem fair. It wouldn't be that way if I was God.

Daddy works hard, and people can count on a good job from him whatever it is. I'm sure he charges fair prices. Frankie said that was somethin' I needed to copy from him – always doin' right by folks. Ol' Mel says, "Kenny – my daddy – should have accomplished a lot more than he has – too cautious." I'm not sure I understand about that. I think for one thing it says he's pretty smart and could have done harder stuff. I'm smart too. So's mamma. I guess I come by it naturally. Frankie got the highest score possible on some Army test. Last year my teacher said I had a vocabulary like a senior in high school – some test we took. I think I owe that to mamma and all the readin' I do. What it *mostly* told me was I need to watch the words I used when I was with Willie and other kids my age. I didn't want to come off lookin' pompous, that is, like a smarty pants. I had noticed sometimes that it aggravated me when other people used the wrong word or when there was a great word available and somebody settled for usin' a run-of-the-mill word. My teachers got on me sometimes for slangin' up the language – droppin' 'g's' and sayin' 'gotta' and 'coulda'. They said it was beneath my intelligence. It's how kids talked in my world. When I got to writin', the *'g's'* and *'got to's'* all seemed to know where they belonged. If I'd have changed my talkin', the other kids would have laughed me out of town.

As I was leavin' the garage, Russ Madison rode up on his bike. He's seventeen and decided not to join up when the other two 17-year-old boys did. He'll be a senior this comin' school year and said he didn't want to risk not finishin' his education. Russ is a quiet kind. He enjoys watchin' others have fun, but I've seldom witnessed him havin' any. He's more a sideline type I suppose. Mel says, "Russ is always

afraid he's not goin' to be up to the task." I tend to think that has somethin' to do with his parents – I've never heard them say a good thing about the boy to anybody, includin' Russ, himself. It doesn't mean they don't love him. They don't bad mouth him – I didn't mean that. My parents point out good stuff about me to me and others all the time. I think it's one reason I'm so confident in myself. Even now, when I understand I'm goin' to have to step up and do things I'm not prepared to do, I believe I can learn how and eventually do a good job – like hayin'. In other words, it doesn't frighten me – the prospect of all that. Poor Russ. Just watchin' him walk down the road makes you wonder if he's goin' to manage to get his next foot out in front of the last one. I like him, partly because he's a gentle person and partly because I can see he needs a friend. The older boys never really included him. I get the idea he's sweet on Linda Compton – she was sort of Frankie's girlfriend before he went off to the army. Frankie and Russ got on good – not best friends but they spent time together off and on – bikin', fishin', campin'.

I have no way of knowin' if she – Linda – likes him for who he is or just because he's all that's left. I've come to see that teenagers have an unreasonable need for friendships with the opposite sex. That is utterly bafflin' to me and Willie, but I'm resigned to the fact it *will* eventually befall *us* as well. I sure hope it isn't Tilly.

Daddy saw me out of my clothes in the bathroom on Saturday night. I'd run the water, just waitin for him to bring up the big kettle with boilin' hot water to warm it up. Only the rich had runnin' hot water from heaters. It didn't really take much on a hot summer night like it was. Our town water supply was an artesian well, and the water stayed pretty cold year-round. Anyway, with me standin' there nature's best, he said, "I see by what's happenin' between your legs, it's time for us to have a talk."

Last year at that time I wouldn't have had any idea what he was talkin' about. This year I have an idea.

He hasn't set a time or anything yet. I asked Frankie about some things like that and he said to just wait for daddy to come to me about it. I wish he'd get on with the 'comin' to

me' part. Me and Willie talk about it sometimes. Willie thinks he has it all figured out – cats, dogs, cattle. I'm willin' to wait and hear about it from somebody who has proved he knows *all* about it.

There at the fillin' station, daddy approached me, wipin' his hands on a rag.

"Son, somethin' unhappy has happened. Ol' Mel's niece from Davis called and said when she went in to visit him just now, she found he had died over night. I need you to run over to Aunt Connie's and have her locate the Sheriff and Doc. Can I count on you to take care of that?"

"Of course. I'm on my way."

He *could* have called her, but he figured I'd be better off having somethin' to do. Daddy was wise about things like that.

I wondered if I was going to cry. I hoped it hadn't been painful for him – dyin'. I figured he'd a rather died in his chair on the porch, but I suppose we don't get to choose our dyin' place. Connie got on the phone and she got others on their phones and within five minutes she'd alerted both Doc Morgan and the sheriff. A deputy was on his way. Connie said I should go over and keep people from going inside his house. I thought for once she had a good idea. I headed over on the trot and positioned myself, sittin' on the top porch step.

Soon, other kids heard and came to stand around wantin' to be a part of the gruesome situation. I was different from most; I was never attracted to gruesome. Big, bad, Butchy also arrived and approached the steps. I stood up.

"We're not supposed to go in there until the deputy or Doc arrives."

"I go wherever I damn well want to go."

He put out his arm to move me out of his way. Somethin' fully unexpected came over me – maybe it came from my new sense of responsibility. I grabbed his arm, pushed my hip into his and flipped him down three steps onto the rock slab sidewalk. He hit his head and lay there unconscious, his scalp bleeding. Frankie had showed me a little bit about *Jiu Jitsu* and I'm here to tell ya, *it works*. Tilly – take charge, Tilly, with the glasses and pigtails – moved

forward and looked after him until adults arrived. The boys in the gatherin' cheered and whistled and clapped. They all hated Butchy. From that day on, they've referred to me as *Mike the Man.* I really wasn't sure if I should be proud of myself for protectin' Ol' Mel or feel bad about hurtin' the kid.

At the supper table, daddy put it into perspective for all of us.

"This evenin' I'd like to have our grace said by Mike the Man."

We exchanged a glace I will never forget. I had never been asked to say grace before – Frankie had sometimes. In those few seconds, a brand new me came to life inside. It was like a bud burstin' into bloom. That may be overly dramatic, but it was somethin' special. To this day, I can revisit those feelings by just rememberin' daddy's eyes. They said, "You did what you had to do." They said, "I'm proud of the good person you have become." They said, "You need to move on, now, in humility."

It never came up between us. Butchy, by the way, began avoidin' me. Bein' in jail a good deal of the time, helped.

It was a sad time in Lords. Ol' Mel had been a good friend to everybody at one time or another. He spoke the truth as he believed it. It's hard to ask more of anybody than that, unless, of course, he makes no effort to substantiate those 'truths'. The town pretty well shut down that Thursday afternoon. There wasn't room in the little church for everybody so many of us younger folks stood out on the lawn. Pastor had opened the windows, so we could hear. The cemetery was behind the church. Six men carried the pine box to the hole in the ground. It didn't seem right that all a guy got after all those years of livin' such a good life was a pine box in a six-foot hole. Maybe that's what moved folks to invent heaven.

Lots of kind words and tear-filled memories were passed around that day. All of that should have been said *before* he died – so he'd a known how we felt. I suppose he knew – his takes on folks were always pretty accurate. I learned he was 88. I had no idea. Nobody else in Lords comes close to bein' that old. I hoped that meant there

wouldn't have to be more funerals for years and years.

Mamma says it's a good thing to cry out your sadness at a time like that. I didn't shed any tears for Ol' Melvin. I even tried after mamma said that. He and I had a good relationship. I did things for him and he did things for me. He was one of those people you could just sit close to and didn't have to say a word to know things are goin' well between you. I think daddy and mamma have that. I was always pickin' Frankie's brain too much to say I'd ever given it a try between him and me. At night I'd often stay awake, waitin' for him to come up to bed so I could talk to him. He'd go along for a while and then say, "Good night, Squirt." I knew that meant for me to keep quiet. I thought it worked out well. Of course, that system made the whole 'little brother goes to bed earlier' thing, pretty much worthless.

I miss him most in the evenin' after I crawl in makin' ready to sleep. I look over at his empty bed and all my wonderin' starts all over – where is he, has he eaten recently, is he warm and dry, has he made new friends, will he be okay – that's the big one. He'd call it one of my nowhere questions.

Friday mornin' was like a new start for Lords – Melvin had lived there 88 years, so it was the first time anybody in town had been there without him. We all knew things would go on. He offered no skills or wares to Lords anymore. There were none of *those* things to miss. He had mostly just been there. No lives depended on him. We'd do fine. I told daddy I felt like part of him was still around because of all the things he'd said and what I remembered of it. Daddy just nodded. Of course, daddy had lots more of those things to remember than I did. I was determined not to let it get me down. Old people died. They knew it would happen – then it just happened. Still, I'd miss him.

I was handin' wrenches and screwdrivers and the like to daddy while he worked on a car – it was Friday morning. A stranger drove in like to get gas. I went out to see how I might help him. He hadn't stopped in a good spot for a fill up.

"There's a shack burnin' back about a mile on the west side of the blacktop – route 27. Don't know if anybody lives there or not but thought I should tell somebody."

"Daddy. Sounds like Horst Bauer's place may be on fire. This man says he saw it."

Daddy came out wipin' his hands. He was *always* wipin' his hands. He got the details from the man and told me to run and tell mamma, so she could get Aunt Connie on it. There was rural fire truck in the station house up by the school, but Horst's place was so small it would likely be gone by the time it got there. All volunteers. Daddy was one – most of the men were. He pointed to the pickup, and we started back up 27. He had the truck movin' before I even had my door closed. For some reason that seemed special – like he knew I could take care of myself. The messages pointin' to that, just kept buildin' up that summer. I sure hoped they were true.

We saw the smoke almost immediately – black, billows. His shack was covered in tar paper – sides and roof. Few things were better at keepin' out the wind and rain than tar paper, but then nothin' burned as good either.

By the time we got there, it was gone – burned to the ground. Old Horst was sittin' on a stump out front.

He was probably over seventy. He spoke very good English, but it was through a thick accent. He had been born in Germany and came to the United States when he was in his twenties. It seemed like there were always threats against him. I remember just after President Roosevelt's speech on the radio sayin' we were joinin' the war, somebody had painted the word KRAUT across the front of his shack. I had helped him paint over it with tar. There had been lots of things like that. He stayed to himself – had a garden, a cow, some chickens. Durin' the warmer months he had a small roadside stand out near the road and he sold eggs and vegetables – sometimes berries and fruit he'd pick in the wilds. Cold months he sold eggs and milk to the general store.

The past two Christmases mamma had invited him to come and have dinner with us. It took some convincin', but my daddy can be very convincin' when it seems necessary. I went along to pick him up and return him home. I'd never been inside his shack – I didn't know anybody who had.

"You okay?" Daddy asked him.

“How can I be okay? Everything is gone.”

He cried without tears, lookin’ sadder than anybody I’d ever seen.

“You still have your garden and chickens and cow,” daddy pointed out. “We’ll have a new place up for you in no time.”

The old man turned to daddy, lookin’ puzzled.

“I don’t understand. New place? I have no money for a new place.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you won’t need any, then.”

The fire truck arrived with its 500 gallons of water that wouldn’t be needed.

“Let us cordon off your property with rope and take you back to town and find you a place to stay. My son, Mike here, will have a house raisin’ event ready by tomorrow morning. By this time next week, you’ll be all fitted out in a new place.”

“I still don’t understand. And if you do what you say, they will just come back and do it all over again. It never really stops. Lots of people hate me and I understand why. I am a proud American, but haters don’t let that stand in the way of their need to hate.”

“How about the Adkins place, daddy? It’s basically right in town so it would be safer. Just a two-room house, but there’s a garden space and that shed out back. It’s got a good roof and all its windows. It won’t be anything to string up a fence for the cow. How long has it just been settin’ there doin’ nobody any good?”

“An interesting idea. I’ll get Horst settled into the back room at the fillin’ station and you get your Aunt Connie on to findin’ out about the Adkins place. I think the son lives over in Yates. Then, you go check out the house – see what it’ll take to make it livable. You can handle all that, right?”

I noted with some pride that it hadn’t been a question.

“I’ll give it my best, Sir.”

And I did. It was one of those bein’ treated like a grown up but still wonderin’ if I had it in me things. By Sunday night, Horst had a new place. Unknown to him, the men and boys of

the town made out a schedule and we took turns watchin' out over him for the remainder of the summer. There were no more incidents. That's the wrong word, of course – incident. It's a whitewash word – makin' somethin' terribly evil sound less so. We helped him move his stand to a spot near the road not far from the fillin' station. People from town would bring extra from their gardens for him to sell. In Lords, many people made no bones about how much they hated the Germans. It was probably even to an unchristian degree. In Lords, however, everybody made it clear they loved one special German – well, German American. It proved one more of O'l Mel's takes: 'It's most impossible to hate somebody you've come to know eye-to-eye and talk-to-talk.'

I

CHAPTER THREE:
The Really Bad Stuff Begins

Fresh off my success at organizin' and supervisin' Horst's relocation, I was feelin' quite special – no, quite *capable* better describes it. Granted, daddy and Aunt Connie and all the other folks in our town pitched in and seemed to know what needed to be done, but daddy gave me credit for doin' a great job. Mamma even went on about it in the letter we wrote to Frankie on Sunday night.

We hadn't heard from him in four weeks. It wasn't all that unusual, but I had a bad feelin' about it. In our letter to him some weeks earlier, I had asked him if I could use his bow and arrows – just for target practice. He had showed me how to shoot and take care of the bow and equipment. I wondered if maybe he really didn't want me to use them, but didn't want to disappoint me, so he hadn't written. I didn't share that with anybody. I hoped that wasn't the case. Puttin' mamma through all those weeks of not knowin' would have been a terrible thing if I was the cause of it.

I was at Aunt Connie's waitin' on the mail truck – really waitin' on a letter from Frankie. She had the radio on. I learned the Allied forces had advanced about halfway up Italy from where they had started down south at the toe. We knew that's where Frankie was. I became upset when the announcer said there was fierce hand to hand and house to house fighting. I found I was shakin', so went outside where I couldn't hear. I

tried to think happy thoughts like mamma always said to do when I was feelin' down. It never worked, but, even knowin' that, never seemed to matter when you were scratchin' the bottom of the barrel for an answer.

There was a sizeable canvas pouch of mail for Lords that day – Mondays were often big days. There was also a telegram envelope. Lords didn't get many of those. I waved the truck on its way and took things inside to Aunt Connie. I handed her the envelope first, thinkin' telegrams were more important. She removed the telegram and her face turned pale. I didn't understand.

"What's wrong?"

"It's from the War Department. It's for Bart and Jane Roland. I'm afraid it's the worst kind of news. I better call them. I hoped we'd never get one of these here in Lords."

"You mean Tommy got killed?"

"It might be he just got wounded."

"They shouldn't get that kind of news over the telephone, Aunt Connie. Let me deliver it."

"Let me talk to your ma, first."

They talked on the phone and mamma said it would be okay. I stuffed the telegram in my pants and ran home to get my bike. I rode as fast as I could wonderin' if that was the right thing to do – get them the news fast, or should I take my time, so they'd have longer not knowin'. My head wouldn't make that decision and my legs just kept peddlin'.

I figured either kind of news should be delivered to his father first – the head of the family. I saw him workin' in the big field between me and the house. I headed right for him across the grass – it would be tall enough to cut for hay in another few weeks and made peddlin' difficult.

He spotted me at some distance and waved. I didn't return it. I suddenly realized I had no idea how to do it – how to deliver it – what to say. I didn't know what to say because I didn't know what the telegram said. I rode to within ten feet of the man and lay my bike down, walkin' on up to him, which seemed to be the more dignified way to go in that situation.

"Mornin' Mike."

"Mornin' Sir. Aunt Connie sent me out with this – a telegram."

I held it out and managed the final steps to where he stood. His jaw set and his eyes narrowed. He took a deep breath and let it go as if to never take another. He took great care in openin' it, or perhaps he was dawdlin', puttin' off the inevitable, if for just a few more moments. I understood. There were times when not knowin' was easier than knowin'.

As he read, I watched sadness consume his face. His shoulders slumped, and he looked away. The tremblin' of his lower lip spread to first to his jaw and then to his cheeks. It was the first time I had seen a man cry. It was terrible. I had no idea what I should do. He put his hand on my shoulder and urged me along beside him as we walked toward the house. He didn't say a word, but I could tell it was important to him to have me there by his side.

Jane saw us comin' and waved from the porch. Neither of us waved back. She hesitated, uncertain like, then left the porch, walkin' to meet us. As we drew near, she began hurryin' toward us.

Bart shook his head and held up the yellow sheet of paper as if to somehow soften the blow. She put her open hands to her face and burst into tears. He drew her in close and they cried together. Presently, they walked on to the house, becomin' like one with their arms enfoldin' each other's waists, leavin' me behind. What a terrible thing – parents losin' their child. It was fully unimaginable to me. I understood I had served my purpose, whatever that had been. They only had each other now, and somehow, they would have to make that work. I felt helpless. I supposed they did, too.

I returned to my bike and pushed it out of the field to the dirt road. I rode back toward town – slowly. The last time I'd seen Tommy he was alive. Now, just like that, he was dead. I didn't know any details. I'd heard the army followed the telegram with a letter. I supposed details couldn't really change anything. While he was off tryin' to kill Germans, Germans killed him. Tommy was dead. The rest of us were alive. How were we supposed to deal with that?

By the time I hit the town limits, I was cryin', too. I

figured if a grown man was allowed to, surely, I was. I stopped and put my bike down. I sat back against the post that held the sign, *'Lords, Ark, Pop. 104'*. The sign was wrong, 103 since Ol' Mel died. Tommy had lived in the country, so he hadn't been counted in town. Still, I wanted to change that number to 102. It was like he belonged. It was like most barriers – they were all meaningless – in town/out of town, pretty/plain, smart/dumb, rich/poor. I found myself sobbin' chest heavin' sobs. I raised my fist toward the sky. "Damn you, God. Go ahead and smite me. Send me to hell for sayin' it, but Damn you, God."

I let myself fall sideways into the tall grass and just lay there lettin' the tears flow. They wouldn't stop, so I guess there was no lettin' to it. The sobbin' wouldn't stop. I just wanted the world to go away. At last it did. I fell asleep.

It was noon when I woke up. Mamma would be worried if I didn't show up at the café for lunch. I wiped my face clean with the inside of my T-shirt – a trick Frankie taught me to keep the outside clean – and then walked my bike to the fillin' station. Daddy was comin' out the side door, cleaned up and ready for lunch. As soon as I saw him, I knew he knew – or at least suspected. He reached out and wrapped his big arms around me. I began all over again with the heavin' sobs. We just stood there.

"Tommy's not comin' back," I managed.

I felt him nod. He patted my back. He turned us around and we went inside. There was an old sofa in the back room. We sat, his arm around my shoulders. I wanted it to stay there forever. I scooted as close as I could and leaned my head against his shoulder. We just sat. A car pulled up to the pump out front. Russ came into view through the front window. He went about takin' care of it. He often spelled daddy over the noon hour. Maybe it was one of those days. I was just thankful I could be with my daddy.

Presently, I scooted away just a bit and managed a question.

"Mamma know?"

"I'm sure she does. Aunt Connie, you know."

I remember noddin', thinkin' that would have usually been worth a smile between us. I wondered if I'd ever smile again.

"What am I supposed to do, now, daddy?"

"You have your life to live and *that's* your job. Live it the best way you know how. That is all any man can ever ask of himself."

"Live it so I can *die* – seems pretty useless right now, you know."

"I suppose. Give yourself some time, and your head will get clearer about it."

"I'll never get over it."

"I didn't say that. I said your head will get *clearer* about it. That will be the time for you think it through. We're all deep into grief right now. It's not the time for decisions, or to swear to new missions, or shift beliefs. It's Bart and Jane that need our attention, now."

There was a long silence.

"I swore at God a little while, ago," I said/admitted needing his reaction.

"So did I."

I looked into his face to see if he was serious about it. He was. I could tell. I leaned my head back against his shoulder with some relief. I figured if worse came to worse, at least I'd know one other person in Hell. I hadn't sat close like that with daddy for a long time. I was glad I still could when I needed to. I was glad it still felt right to be there like that – for me and for him. For just a second, I let myself wonder how it would have been if that telegram had been for *my* parents. I put it out of mind immediately, but it did raise another question.

"How long will it take for him to get back here for his funeral?"

"His body may not come back. Sometimes the fallen soldiers are buried close to where they died."

"That stinks. He got killed fightin' to free a country that wasn't his and then he gets buried there with strangers

instead of back here with people that love him. It really stinks."

Durin' those past weeks, I had been forced to come to grips with dyin' – real dying, not imagined dying, not cops and robbers dying. All parts of it scared me, but I came to believe if there was a right kind of death, it was for old people not boys.

Russ entered the front door and called out.

"Kenny? Ten gallons. An even dollar. Money and stamps on the register."

He knew we were in there together and he'd not interrupt. Russ was a good person. I wondered how he was feelin'. No, I wondered what he was doin' with his feelin's, where he had put them, how he had done that, was that how big boys were supposed to handle it? I was going to be a simply terrible big boy.

Daddy went to see mamma. I wasn't hungry, so I went to climb high in the old oak out front of Mel's place, resigned to just being sad for a while – like daddy had said. Deep inside, I understood that Lords and life would both go on. I wondered how many boys from Lords had gone off to be killed in wars.

Aunt Connie said such sad things just meant we all had to pull harder to keep a good outlook and to make ready for the time our boys came home – to be sure they still had their *Lords* waitin' for them. At eleven, I had no idea that wasn't possible. With their absence, the town would necessarily change. Because of the nature of their absence, *they* would necessarily change. Little could I imagine that many of them who could return, would choose not to return.

On Wednesday of that week, there was really good news in Lords. James and Evvy's baby arrived. Doc said it was a healthy, squallin', baby boy with a head of hair a mamma collie would be proud of. Everybody seemed pleased. I had observed that baby boys were celebrated more enthusiastically than baby girls. I didn't understand why, but I did understand it was a fact. Maybe that just verified what me and Willie had always known – boys were the best – girls were intolerable – and somehow as adults they had to work it out. It made me begin wonderin' about that. A person was a person – male or female – and both were necessary parts of God's

plan, so how could one really be better than the other? Daddy hadn't covered *that* in our talk.

About that talk. I found most of it fascinating. I found some of it disgusting. I was glad to know about all of it. With that topic all straightened out, I felt like I had moved on from bein' a little kid. There were questions I didn't ask because for some reason daddy seemed uncomfortable – talkin' about it. We had the talk in my bedroom. When he was finished, he went to Frankie's bookcase and found a book, which he handed me.

"Here's a book about boys growin' up. Frankie found it helpful. I think you will, too. It's just for you and nobody else. It's each parent's job to handle it the way he thinks is right. You understand?"

I nodded.

Really, I hadn't the slightest idea what he meant but got the message I was not to share it with Willie. That would be alright – his theory based on cows and dogs was pretty much accurate. Well, it left out love and respect and thoughtfulness, which daddy made clear were really important between men and women. It was good to have finally received the facts. It was special that they had come from daddy – like we suddenly shared a really important bond – not a secret but right up there at that level. I couldn't explain it further than that. Well, like father to son had grown up to man to man, I guess.

Later, me and Willie were back at the creek – me and Willie and Ol' Blue. We were just sittin', knowin' what we needed to talk about but not knowin' how to do it. It's a wonder Ol' Blue's back and ears didn't get worn out that afternoon, the way we petted him instead of talkin. I had wondered if he really liked bein' petted or was just content to let us do it because he was inclined to think it must somehow help us. Another nowhere question.

Willie said it first.

"I'm worried about my brother, Dave, over there in the war. Never really thought about him gettin' killed until Tommy, you know?"

"Yeah. I know. Me, too."

"I cry about it in bed at night," he said, no embarrassment showing.

"Yeah. I know. Me, too."

"What do ya think it's like?"

"What do I think what's like?"

"Gettin' shot and dyin'."

"I 'spose every dyin' is different. Some is probably quick, and some is probably not. Quick probably don't hurt. *Not* quick, probably does."

He nodded.

"I think quick would be best."

I nodded, agreeing.

"You think it would be okay for me to pray that if Dave has to die it should be quick for him?"

Willie often counted on me to provide answers for him that I didn't have. I didn't want to disappoint him, but I didn't want to deceive him, either. Willie's capacity to make complicated decisions was pretty limited.

"I doubt if it could be bad to pray for that. Pastor talks about bein' merciful – I'm thinkin' askin' for a quick death would count as merciful. I pray for Frankie to be safe and not get shot. I'd rather think *that* way. I guess deep inside me I don't have any idea if prayin' for *anything* is worthwhile."

Willie clearly didn't understand, and he let it go. He would never have questioned prayin' because he'd been told to pray so he prayed. He'd never question whether it worked because that wasn't part of it – a person prayed and then God decided whether to answer it or not. It relieved a person of all responsibility in all matters. If things didn't work out, it was never the fault of the one prayin' – it was always God's fault – *decision*, may be a more acceptable word. Still no fault of the person. He'd prayed like he'd been told to. In Willie's world, you just prayed.

It was like lots of other things he just did because it was what people did, without any personal thought about its value or whether it made any sense. Like he crossed his heart when promisin' to be honest, and never questioned a teacher or

pastor – just accepted whatever they said as bein' so. He wore clothes because he was told that was the right way – never askin' why and puttin' the answers he received to the most intense logical and factual scrutiny. In olden times he'd have believed Atlas held up the world while standin' on the back of a turtle that swam in a great ocean, because that's what he would have been told to believe. He'd have believed the sun traveled across the sky, chasin' the moon out of its way and never questioned it, because that's what he'd been told. Thinkin' about things beyond what he'd been told, never entered is head. I hoped he was happy that way.

I've always asked questions. It seems lately I've been questionin' almost everything. I am discoverin' Willie's way is easier – just accept what you're told and don't think about it. That provides a lot of security, I can tell you that, but it does nothin' to improve the world or advance knowledge.

Sometimes, I get on my soapbox. Tilly says it is one of my worst features. She may be right. I tend to keep myself perennially uncomfortable. Pastor says it is the scourge of bein' intelligent. 'Scourge' just *has* to be the wrong word – maybe 'challenge' would be more accurate. That's how I'm going to think of it – challenge.

I know daddy and mamma worry all the time about Frankie. There is probably nothin' that leaves a person feelin' as helpless as this – knowin' your son or brother is in a place he can be killed any minute and not bein' able to do one thing about it – well, pray for those who need to escape from reality. There are seven sets of parents and brothers and sisters here in Lords that can never leave worry behind 'til the war's over – well, maybe Bart and Jane, now, but they just replaced it with somethin' far worse – heartache and grief forever.

That's interesting: the things that worry and grief have in common are that both leave the person feelin' helpless, and neither one ever makes a helpful difference.

Nothin' about any of this sounds like somethin' a lovin' God would force on the people he created. 'Force on' is the wrong concept – allow to happen is better – closer to what I meant in light of things Pastor said.

Frankie used to tell me to lighten up about things I had

no control over. I said okay, how do I do that? He admitted he didn't know. I told him he better stop offerin' that advice then. He nodded. I think I made him think about somethin' he'd never thought about before – bein' responsible, intellectually. At the time, I figured I'd done him a favor. Now, I'm not so sure. It's becomin' pretty clear to me; a Willie World is sure a lot more comfortable than a Mikey World. I think that's why people so easily accept his and deny mine.

I'm so scared about everything and nobody has any good advice. Frankie says stop bein' serious about stuff that's important to me. Daddy says just wait until my head clears about it. Pastor says to pray about it and indicates I should stop askin' him questions he can't answer. I guess I'm on my own, and for an eleven-year-old boy to realize he's on his own, is just about the scariest thing I can imagine.

CHAPTER FOUR:
Our Telegram

I had calmed myself down about the onslaught of disturbing loose ends – don't ask me how – and me and Willie were anticipatin' a fun-filled Fourth of July. There wouldn't be fireworks that year – the army needed all the gun powder – but there would be the band and the parade and the rodeo for kids with goats and pigs – and the annual fish fry, of course. Ol' Blue would be happy about the fireworks thing. They always sent him into fits of apoplexy. The fourth was on Sunday. There were enough folks in town that still believed there was no room on Sunday for celebrations – well, for *fun*, period – so our fourth would take place on Saturday the third.

Some of the kids – well, mainly me – talked the town council into buyin' some substitutes for fireworks. There would be crepe paper streamers on sticks for the girls to twirl and a dozen sets of ten-inch, tin cymbals for the boys to clang. Mr. Wendt had saved gas rationin' stamps, so he could fly his two-seater around over-head trailin' a, *Happy 4th*, banner. The fifth and sixth grade boys had been fishin' over in the river for three days so there'd be plenty for the fish fry. Each home contributed a portion of their cookin' oil – rationed – so the fry could really be a fry – a deep fired, breaded fish fry. The previous year, skillet fried had been substituted, and it just didn't seem right. Mrs. Wendt – Mr. Wendt's wife – was the

chairman of the event. She always pulled off good events.

It signaled that summer vacation from school was already one third over. Willie stewed about it. I pretty much just shrugged. I liked workin' with daddy at the fillin' station and with mamma at the café but gettin' an education was my top priority. I still had lots of time to myself. I was goin' back on Wednesday to help Mr. Roland with his second cuttin' of hay. I still hadn't spent my last fifty cents or the seventy-five from my allowances in June, so this could mean my savings would reach two dollars and five cents – the most money I'd ever had at once. Willie said keepin' money in a glass chicken was like havin' no money at all. Tilly said if I wasn't going to spend it I should put it in the bank. There wasn't one within twenty-five miles. It would take twenty or twenty-five cents in gas to get there and back. If the interest rate was one percent, I'd earn 2 cents a year. Girls!

Finally, Saturday arrived and by nine o'clock Mrs. Wendt had distributed the streamers and noise makers. The city bands from all four towns joined together and divided their time. Our concert would be at noon, followed by the fish fry and then the parade. The parade really was not much of anything, but it was *our* not much of anything, and that made it important.

At eleven, two significant things happened. First, overhead, Mr. Wendt's plane circled for almost twenty minutes. I predicted lots of neck aches come Sunday mornin'. Second, the mail tuck arrived. Aunt Connie was on her back porch watchin' the banner in the sky, so I received the canvas bag from the driver, ready to wave him on his way, when he handed me the telegram envelope. He wished me a happy early fourth and left. I took things inside and put them on Aunt Connie's desk.

I had a terrible itchin' to look in the telegram envelope. I figured I shouldn't. I never had looked before because Aunt Connie was in charge – it was her sworn responsibility I suspected. How could one short peek hurt? Nobody'd know. The envelope was heavy, reusable, pasteboard about ten by twelve inches in width and length. It was secured by a string that was wound between two pasteboard buttons – one on the

flap and one on the envelope. I unwound it – already feelin' guilty. I looked in – one telegram. Should I take it out? Without answering, I reached in and removed it. My hands had always had a tendency not to wait on my head for instructions. It was upside down, so I righted it to read the address. "Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Rakes."

My legs trembled, and I couldn't catch my breath. I sat down, right then and there, on the floor. Out of habit, I reached out for Ol' Blue, but he wasn't there. How should I handle it? I knew the right thing would be to put it back and leave it on her desk. Instead, I followed my immediate inclination and folded the telegram and slipped it into my hip pocket. Then, I placed the big envelope underneath the things in a lower drawer of her desk, so she wouldn't know it had come. I left.

My heart was thumpin' – I could see it movin' the front of my T-shirt. While folks continued to look up, clappin' as Mr. Wendt made some fancy moves in the air, I began runnin' and presently found myself at the creek. I sat back against a tree, breathin' hard. I discovered I was cryin'. A few minutes later, Ol' Blue caught up and lay beside me. I bent down and pulled him close. He whined, as if he knew somethin' was not the way it should be.

I had two things to deal with immediately: get myself under control and decide how to handle the telegram. What were my options? I could go ahead and read it, but that would entail openin' it so I couldn't keep secret what I had done. I could save it and deliver it to daddy later. When? I didn't feel right keepin' it from him, but I didn't want to ruin everybody's day by givin' it to him right then.

I made the decisions: I would not open it, and I would wait until the big party was over. I needed to be back in town. I knew my parents always kept track of where I was, although their method escaped me. How could I keep myself together? I'd avoid daddy and mommy close-up. I'd make sure they could see me – that I was alright – but I'd go join the boys makin' noise with the cymbals or find Willie. He had out of town relatives from Oklahoma – two cousins about his age so he was mostly busy bein' with them. Blue and I understood.

I returned – a slow walk that Ol' Blue could handle. I

went to the servin' table and got my fish and slaw and found I wasn't hungry. I motioned Blue under the cloth that draped the table and left my dish there for him to enjoy. I didn't feel like bangin' cymbals together so handed mine to Larry Miller, a five-year-old. He beamed. His father didn't. I walked around pretty much aimlessly and avoided havin' to stop and talk with anybody. It wasn't hard. People were excited and already engaged with each other.

At three, I took my turn crankin' the handle on an ice cream churn. Tilly came by to replenish my ice and salt. She didn't expect me to speak to her so the fact I didn't, was of no consequence. She said she liked my shirt – it was a white T-shirt. What was with her? I withheld my compliments in return, which, as it turned out was not at all difficult, since I had none to offer her.

By five, the clean-up was pretty well over, and folks began headin' for their houses. The comments I overheard were dependably predictable – 'the very best 4th celebration Lords ever had'. I supposed that was necessary to maintain the illusion that Lords was the best place to live in the whole world – not that most people who lived there had ever lived anywhere else – so comparisons were fully imaginary. Oh, well, I figured it was good to treasure where you lived – what was yours. Perhaps such statements helped them forget for a few moments about Tommy and the six others that were still in the midst of battle. I believe the word is parochial – separate the good time at home from the troubles out in the world.

I arranged for Russ to mind the fillin' station – there should be a good business with all the vehicles leavin' back for the surroundin' area. I went to daddy and explained about Russ and said there was somethin' important I needed to talk with him and mamma about. He shrugged and walked with me toward home. Daddy never put me off when I required him for any reason. Mamma was already home preparin' to put the extra slaw and leftovers in the refrigerator and do up the dishes. The café was closed for the day.

"Mike has something to discuss with us," daddy said to mamma.

I took a chair at the kitchen table and folded my hands

in front of me, waitin'. With a strange glance between them they joined me there. I began.

"I've kept somethin' from you today because I didn't want to ruin the celebration for everybody. It may have been wrong of me. If it was, I'm sorry. I did what I thought was best."

They shared another glance – that one more puzzled than strange. I waited for them to look back at me.

I removed the telegram and flattened it out against the tabletop, then slid it across to daddy. They exchanged despairin' looks – the only word I had to describe it – despairin'. Daddy's hands trembled as he worked to open it. Mama bit at he3re lower lip and kept her eyes focused on daddy's lips. He removed the yellow sheet from inside. He read it silently, first. His face cleared a bit, and he read it aloud.

"Your son, Franklin Rakes, has been severely wounded. He is being treated in a hospital and will be released from service on the fifth of this month, after which he will return to Lords, Arkansas, or a veteran's hospital in the vicinity. Information to follow via PO."

We all broke out in tears. It's odd about tears – they can represent almost any emotion. Bart and Jane's had been about the greatest possible sadness. Ours were about the greatest possible relief. I figured those soon changed into the greatest possible happiness. It was sad to know he had been seriously wounded but there was happiness in knowin' he was going to recover and would soon be home and out of danger. I pledged in my head right there and then that I'd take care of him for as long as it took – forever, if that's what it would take. I was younger – I could do that.

We had no idea what his injury was. I figured it had to have been terribly serious for him to be mustered out from soldiering, as bad as the Allies needed soldiers. My remainin' question had not been addressed. I pushed for an answer.

"Did I do okay, keepin' the telegram back?"

My parents looked at each other. Mamma reached across the table and took my hands in hers.

"You did just fine, son. It took great courage to handle it like you did, keepin' your distress to yourself all that time to spare the rest of us."

Daddy nodded, and I could tell he shared her feelin' about it. My, how I was relieved. I did have to wonder why my tears started runnin' again. Then and there I decided if I was God, I'd color code tears – yellow for happiness, green for relief, red for pain and black for sadness. I'd take it up with Him at bedtime.

On Wednesday the letter came – the 'information will follow' letter. It provided both relief and great sadness. Frankie had been shot in his left knee. It had been devastated beyond repair. He would never walk on his own again. We assumed that meant crutches or a cane – maybe a wheelchair. My mind rushed in to tell me he could still manage a good and productive life that way. There was talk in Washington about a free education bill for veterans. If that happened, Frankie could graduate from college and be whatever he wanted to be. Both daddy and mamma took heart from that, I could tell.

It provided a new sense of purpose for me. I knew my parents would never be able to send me to college. I'd heard about scholarships and I'd look into them as soon as I got back into school. I suddenly understood why I was savin' my money. I had to admit it. Some of what Tilly had said about handlin' money began to make sense.

That, of course, set up a new requirement for me – decidin' what I would study. What would the educated Michael Rakes become? I had lots of time to decide. What I needed to do was begin thinkin' more seriously about my interests – what I might be good at and what I had to contribute to the world. I got so excited it was difficult to contain myself. I counted up – six years before I could start college, then four more for a degree, five if I went for a second degree. I wondered how many years it took to become a doctor – like Doc Morgan. I'd talk with him about it.

But I was gettin' ahead of myself – my eleven-year-old self. I had the homecomin' of my big brother to prepare for. Our bedroom had never been so clean – I mean *never* – unless it had happened before I was born. I tended to forget

there were things in my family before me.

I figured he could use his same bed even with his bad knee. If not, we'd work it out. I wondered what he'd do to occupy himself – if he'd be capable of helpin' daddy. I didn't know if a veteran would allow himself to work in a café. I also knew those were not things for me to stick my nose into, but my nose reliably found its way into most things there in Lords. It was a small nose so didn't take up much room.

We finally got a letter from Frankie – one he'd written in a hospital. He seemed to be in good spirits. He said we needed to know he would be on crutches for several more months – maybe a lot longer. He told me he was countin' on me to help him with his rehab. I learned from Doc that rehab was short for rehabilitation and that rehabilitation meant active recuperation and that recuperation often involved physical exercises. Was I glad we had a dictionary at my house. It was the active recuperation exercises that Frankie was referrin' to. I knew I could become the best 'Recuper' anybody had ever seen.

In that letter, he made two other requests: one that mamma talk with Linda and prepare her for his condition, and two, he stated that he didn't want to have to talk about his experiences in the war. My parents and I wouldn't have any problem with that last one, but I knew the kids in Lords would be all over him for stories – especially the boys – the bloodier the better.

I sent out word there was going to be a meetin' of all the kids in the park at nine o'clock Friday morning. Attendance was mandatory said Mike the Man. Come nine o'clock they were all there – boys and girls. The meetin' took twenty seconds.

"Okay, here's the deal, kids. I don't want to hear about any of you ever askin' Frankie anything about his war experiences. If I do, I promise you, Mike the Man will deal with you like he dealt with Butchie. Got it?"

Twenty-three young heads nodded with some vigor – not an insincere nod in the lot. I turned and left. I had never in my life really threatened anybody before, but I'd have done anything for my big brother. Also, I realized, I hadn't actually

Butchied anybody since I Butchied, Butchie. Who knew if I even had a second Butchiein' in me. I figured so long as they figured I had it in me, that was all that counted.

I was at the fillin' station every mornin' at eight – that's when the bus came through. It only stopped when it had a passenger to let off or when the "Bus Stop" sign was hung on the telephone post out by the road signalin' somebody was waitin'. Days came and days went; it didn't stop. Each time that it just rolled on by, it heightened my anticipation for the next day.

Tuesday arrived. William Decker was going to ride the bus down to Little Rock on business, so I put up the 'Bus Stop' sign. It pulled off the blacktop – just enough to say it was off. The air was filled with that one of a kind, obnoxious, bus smell. It reminded me how loud a bus really was – just standin' there up close. I helped the driver stow Mr. Decker's bag in the big compartment underneath. I hadn't been prepared for anybody gettin' off. The bus pulled back onto the blacktop and I turned back toward the fillin' station.

"Hey Squirt. You just gonna ignore me or what."

There he was, my Frankie, standin' all alone in his uniform, lookin' like *Ike* himself, I thought. I ran to him and called for daddy. I hesitated with the hug, not sure how to navigate around the crutches. He let them drop to his sides, supportin' his weight on his right leg. I administered one official Mike the Man hug and wanted to never let it go.

Daddy showed up – wipin' his hands – and I let go, wonderin' how they would react to each other. I remembered when I was a little boy, seein' daddy hug Frankie but not in years. Well, I'll tell you, I saw it again that mornin'. I hadn't cried like I thought I might – too busy takin' it all in, adjustin' to the surprise, I figured later. Frankie hadn't shed a tear either. Not so, between the two of them.

I ran down the street to get mamma.

"Mamma. He's back. He's here. Frankie's back."

I took her by her arm and pulled as she got herself out of her apron. She actually ran up to him. I'd never seen my mamma run before. Daddy stepped back and gave way to her;

he was wearin' a smile like I'd never seen on him before. He moved back in for a huge three-way reunion. I wasn't about to be left out, so wormed my way right into Frankie's belt buckle.

It wasn't long until there was a dozen or more folks standin' around callin' out their, 'welcome backs'. Somebody – later I'd find out it had been Willie – began ringin' the church bell. That sounded just like him. Others arrived. The flag in front of Aunt Connie's, which had been kept at half-mast since the notification about Tommy, was raised to the very top. I was sure Bart and Jane would understand. It may have been the best homecomin' ever, there my little town of Lords, Arkansas.

Presently, we allowed our family scrum to loosen.

"Pick up my sticks for me, will you Squirt?"

I got right to it while daddy spoke to him.

"While you've been away, *Squirt's* moved up the ladder around here to *Mike the Man*."

Although he probably never knew it, that was one of the best things daddy had ever done for me – to tell Frankie that.

"Really? That's great – *Mike the Man* – I like the sound."

He reached out and ruffled my hair. I only ever let him and mamma do that – well I suppose I would have allowed it from daddy but he'd never exhibited any inclination in that direction.

"I'm starved, Ma," Frankie said.

"Breakfast's as close as the Café. You look good. I'm happy about that."

"The hospitals treated me well. They served up good food and pretty nurses."

There it was, the old barrier, him preferrin' girls and me preferrin' Ol' Blue. We'd got by it before and I assumed we'd get by it again. And, if what daddy had said durin' our talk held any truth, I'd likely begin lookin' girls over pretty soon, myself. Thinkin' back, I do sort of remember when the affliction had overtaken Frankie – he was about twelve, I think. My big-brother-time took a major hit after that.

I looked back at the station wonderin' if I needed to

stay. Russ saw my conflict and waved me on. The people in Lords were good people.

We sat at our usual table – the horseshoe booth back in a corner – the least popular spot with payin' customers. The big boys used to sit there after school, tellin' lies and sippin' cokes. Things suddenly became awkward. I tried to help by recountin' Mr. Went and his shenanigans with his plane on the fourth. Presently, it just became silent. Frankie handled it.

"We need to face the fact that things are different now – me and you guys. I've seen and done terrible things and that's all I am willing to say on the matter. I'm home again, now. I think we need to just carve those seven months out of my life and begin focusing on our past life together and on our futures. I'm going to be involved in rehab – that's going to be my major focus to see what my physical potential is going to be. Then, I'll have to find a way to fit me and that back into the world. I know the deal was that if I joined the army as a senior, I'd be graduated just as if I'd done all the work. I may decide to go back and really finish those classes. It's one option.

"I've done lots of thinking about it, and I've decided we need to think of the future as a family adventure and just relax about it and see where it takes us. Can we agree to those things?"

Daddy looked at mamma first. They nodded at each other and then moved it on to Frankie. I added my vigorous nods, although they didn't seem to be the ones that counted. I figured I understood that. The relationship among the three of them had changed – it was now three adults in the house. I wondered how they would work that out. Curfew? I doubted it. Girls in his room – not as long as half of it was mine, I'd tell him that.

We loved each other. It would all be worked out. Who knew, Mike the Man might even get a summertime bedtime extension to nine thirty.

As that first week eased on, some of the awkwardness peeled away but some stuck. I found myself watchin' him when he wasn't aware of me and I wondered about the horrible things he'd been through, knowin' *I'd* never know and knowin' that *he'd* never be able to forget. One of the boys at

church said when his brother came home, he'd have terrible nightmares – he'd cry and call out and sit up on the edge of his bed like he had his gun and was pointin' it around the room. I hoped Frankie didn't have to go through any such thing. Mark – the boy from church – said the best thing to do at a time like that was to just let it play itself out – maybe turn on the light if it was happenin' in the dark. If he began starin' at me, I should say somethin' like, 'I'm your brother, Mike, and we're in our room in our parent's home in Lords. It's night. You've had a bad dream."

I memorized *those* words, I'll tell you I did. Two weeks in, and it hadn't happened. I took that as a good sign. Durin' that time, he had split his days between home, the station and the café. He made no attempt to contact anybody, includin' Linda. I didn't understand that.

One night after he came up to go to bed – I'd been lyin' awake, waiting, for some time – he said he thought it was time for me to see his knee. Up to then he'd managed to keep it shielded from me when he changed clothes. He hadn't *asked*, he *told* me it was time. I nodded, hopin' I wouldn't throw up. My fantasies had been horrific. He probably understood that. He sat on the edge of his bed and slipped out of his pants. He motioned me over to him.

"This is your one opportunity, so take a good long look. Examine it. Ask questions. Get it out of your system. Then we'll never speak of it again."

I crossed the room to where he was. I must admit it didn't look as bad as I figured it would, but then I hadn't known what to figure. My continuing image of it had been an inch-wide hole clean through his knee, with blood oozin' around inside it. What was really there were cuts – probably some from the doctor's operation. They were covered with dried scabs and tiny, dark, dots from where the stitches had been. During my lifetime I'd had my share of those. I figured they'd eventually become scars. I counted six. On the right inside of the knee was a sunken spot, half an inch or more deep. I pointed."

"The surgeons had to remove a big chunk of knee bone that was crushed into splinters. It left an empty space. They

sewed the skin back over it."

"Can I ask if it hurts?"

"Some. Nothing like it did at first. Once those crusts on top of the wounds dry up and fall away, I can start exercising. I'm told that should help make it feel better – maybe even take all the pain away."

"So, you can get to walk, again?"

"No. I'm never going to walk normally, again, but the muscles in that leg have atrophied – that's doctor talk for sort of dried up. I need to work them to get them back into shape – to fill out and regain strength. That's where I hope you'll come in – help me get them back in shape. They should be able to hold my weight again with no problem. Then I may be able to be fitted with a leg or knee brace and learn how to get around without the sticks. The is going to remain stiff – it will never bend like it used to."

"Sticks. Your crutches, you mean."

He nodded.

I nodded, and said, "thank you," indicatin' I was finished with my one-time-only and returned to my bed. When he was ready, I turned off the light.

He hadn't forgotten:

"Goodnight, Squirt – sorry – Mike the Man."

I was used to cryin' myself to sleep. That had been out of worry and fear for his life – it reflected my sense of helplessness and became ten times worse after the news about Tommy. I found myself cryin' again that night. I kept it quiet. The reason had changed. It was for Frankie the person I loved, because I suddenly realized he could never be the same person he used to be, and how I hoped he'd find somebody inside himself he could still love and enjoy. Up to *that* point, God had *no idea* how angry I could get with him.

CHAPTER FIVE:
Sad Words

A week or so later, Frankie received a letter from one of his army buddies – I'd learn it was a boy his age he had fought beside in the same platoon. I ran it home to him that mornin' assumin' it would make him happy. It did – at first. When I entered the house, he was at the kitchen table, makin' ready to go help mamma at the café.

"Ya got a letter," I announced, handin' it to him. He glanced at the return address and tore it open with some enthusiasm, I thought. That was good. I hadn't seen a whole lot of it since he returned. It made me smile.

He read it to himself – I hadn't expected anything different. Gradually, his expression changed. In the end, his lip quivered. He got up from the table and stuffed the two sheets into his rear pocket.

"Got pain this morning. Tell ma I'll be over later if it eases up. Maybe you could go over and help with the dishes for a while."

That served two purposes, I could tell. It covered for him at the café and it got me out of his hair. I was okay with both of them.

He climbed the steps to our room – somethin' he had avoided except that one time at night, partly due to the pain, I suspected. I figured, though, that he mostly just didn't want to

do things that reminded him of his problem, and painin' while climbin' the stairs had to remind him.

I wanted to ask how I could help, but somethin' told me that would only aggravate whatever had started eatin' at him. I headed toward the door as he started up the steps. I held back to make sure he made it before actually leavin'. I might have heard him sobbin' by the time he reached the upstairs. I tried to put it out of my mind and trotted up the street to the Café.

"Frankie's hurtin' this morning, mamma, so I figured I could sub for a while. He said he might be over later."

Mamma gave me a nod and that smile where the lower lip comes up over the top one – never the indication of a good feelin'. I kept up with the dishes and bussed some. None of it distracted me from wonderin' about what was in that letter.

Durin' a lull, I told mamma I was goin' to check on Frankie. She nodded.

My plan was to creep up the stairs and just peek in on him to make sure he was okay – whatever that might have meant that morning. At the bottom of the stairs I found the letter – he'd never secured the sheets back in the envelope and they fell out. I picked it up and sat on the third step to think. That didn't work. I went out back and called Blue. Durin' hot days, he preferred stayin' on the cool soil under the front porch when his presence wasn't requested elsewhere. There was a clump of a dozen trees at the back line of our lawn. It was a good thinkin' spot. Blue caught up with me as I was pickin' a trunk to lean against. I found a shady spot and a stick and began whittlin'. I always thought my best when I was sittin' and whittlin' with Ol' Blue within easy reach. Contact with another bein' was always a lift when I had somethin' on my mind and O'l Blue was the perfect choice – always appeared interested and never tried to sway me one way or the other.

My main dilemma was whether or not to read the letter. On the one hand it was *his* letter, so it was none of my business. On the other hand, if it contained somethin' I could help about, it might have been my duty to see what it was – so I could make a plan to help or somethin'. Bein' whichever one I decided on was going to be based on the fact I loved

Frankie, my question became, which was more important – his right to privacy or my responsibility to help him if I could? I couldn't help him if I didn't know what needed helpin'. At eleven, the second choice was an easy winner.

I remember takin' a big breath and holdin' it for just a moment before I unfolded the pages and arranged them in order. It was from a boy named Marlon. I was a fast reader, so I scanned down the page to get the gist of it. It continued on the back and most of the way down the other sheet. Some of it was written in soldier talk so I didn't get it all first time through. It was sad, I got that much – somethin' about the platoon Frankie had been attached to was ambushed and everybody but Marlon was killed. He was wounded and was writin' from a hospital. Due to recent, heavy losses, that platoon had been down to just eleven soldiers. Marlon said he thought if they had been at full capacity – apparently 20 – it would have been a whole different story. I thought it was a terrible thing to write to Frankie about it considerin' everythin'. It came off like Marlon was blamin' Frankie for havin' got hurt and not bein' there.

Frankie was always prone to feelin' guilty. I overheard daddy and mamma talkin' about it once – talkin' about how they needed to be careful to avoid makin' him feel that way. It was the first time I had any idea parents had conversations about such things – what their children needed. I wondered what they said about me.

I needed to get the letter back on the step where I found it – so he wouldn't know I knew. Even knowing, didn't really help. What had happened, had happened, and there was nothin' anybody could do to fix that. Frankie would take it the way Frankie would take it. I was fully helpless in it all.

I entered the house quietly, laid it on the steps and left just as quietly. I felt a great relief about that. I *had* felt both guilty for doin' it – readin' it – and afraid that he'd find out – disappoint him. At that point, I just felt guilty. I continued to be upset that the other boy had written Frankie about the ambush. Maybe it helped him to write about it, to share it. Still, I thought that was insensitive and selfish – not thinkin' about what it would do to my brother. Maybe over there, killin' and

dyin' were so commonplace he didn't think twice about it. I just couldn't imagine how terrible war must be.

The images the story brought up for me were horrible. Worse, were the images about Frankie bein' in the middle of such a thing and havin' to kill the other soldiers. I wondered how many boys he had killed. I wondered how anybody could ever live with themselves after havin' killed one person let alone a dozen or two dozen. He'd been in combat for five months. If he just killed one person every day that would be 150. My God!

I headed for the bushes and threw up.

I sat on the ground for several minutes makin' sure I was done. I headed back to the café. It was near noon, so it would be getting' busy. I needed to get after the dishes so there'd be enough to get through 'til afternoon. Mornin's were mostly one plate meals – bacon and eggs and coffee time. Noons were three platers – salad, main meal, dessert with a glass for water and a cup for coffee. The orders were mostly whatever the special was – my favorite was hot beef sandwiches with brown gravy, mashed potatoes and green beans. Afternoons was mostly just the occasional pie and coffee – sometimes a sandwich for folks passing down route 27, my favorite was ham salad. Sandwiches were served with dill pickles when mamma could come by them. From five to six-thirty was supper. The vegetables were the same from one menu item to another, but choices were available among chicken, steak, and ham. I liked steak best, but the family ate after most the others had finished, so we took what was left. That was okay. Mamma was the greatest cook and it was all good.

I hoped Frankie would show up for lunch. He didn't. Mamma fixed him a plate and I took it back to the house. I called up the stairs, not sure how to approach him about it.

"Frankie! Mamma sent lunch for you. Shall I bring it up?"

"I'll come down. Feeling a little better. Thanks for subbing and all. Just this damn knee."

It was the first time I had ever heard him swear. Willie

said big boys swore a lot when they were together away from other folks. I'd heard that sailors swore all the time but hadn't thought about it spreadin' to soldiers. I figured he'd apologize for it. He didn't – like it was just how he talked, now. Still another change.

I set the plate on the table at his place. I heard him begin comin' down the stairs. It was still a struggle every time. I called up.

"Milk okay. I forget to bring coffee."

He'd learned to drink coffee while he'd been away.

"Milk's fine . . . Thanks."

I got the idea there weren't many please and thank yous in the army. They usually came as after thoughts, now. Bendin' over was still nearly impossible for him, and I wondered how he'd handle pickin' up the letter. He saw it but didn't stop or say anything. That surprised me. He had become fiercely independent about doin' things for himself. I wanted to help with his crutches when he'd sit down, but he preferred to take care of them himself. I supposed faced with the prospect of havin' to deal with that for the rest of his life, it was good to accept it and learn the ropes as soon as possible.

His face was pretty much back to holdin' his usual look – the sadness I'd seen earlier that mornin' was not evident. I was resigned to the fact that the smile was no longer just an automatic part of his look. It faded soon after that first morning at the café. Maybe what Aunt Connie called his Impish disposition had given way to a more serious take on life. But it *was* a good improvement on what I'd witnessed earlier that morning. I felt better about it.

We had a pretty good conversation while he ate – I nursed a glass of milk with him, so he wouldn't feel alone at the table. For the first time, he asked about people. I guess daddy had broke the news to him about Tommy, because he didn't ask about him. They'd been really close friends. I told about Russ helpin' out at the fillin' station. I wished I hadn't. I sensed he was still unhappy that he hadn't joined up with the others. Maybe that was just me expectin' that reaction. He asked about Ol' Mel. I hated to have to break the news to him,

considerin' it had to do with death and all. Frankie took it better than I'd expected.

"He was a old man, Mike. He'd lived a great life. It's sad, I suppose, but that's how life's supposed to be."

I think what he might have been sayin' was that there was somethin' reassurin' to bein' back where the normal parts of livin' was happenin' – new lives bein' born and old lives passin' on naturally. He surprised me by talkin' about it so easy.

"*Passing on* is a strange term, Mikey. Religious folks use it to mean a person's soul passes on to Heaven. Less religious folks use it to mean passing on the responsibilities of society to those who are left – the new generation taking over from older one."

"Which do you believe?" I asked, wishin' I hadn't as soon as the words had rushed out of my face.

He looked at me for long moment before he spoke.

"I doubt if ma and dad want me sharing my beliefs about such things with you. You know what *they* believe – ma and dad. The time will soon come you have to make your own decisions about it."

"Don't go tryin' to protect me, big brother. You wouldn't believe the battle I've been havin' with God these past months."

Frankie laughed out loud and ruffled my hair.

"Who's winning, so far?"

"It's not so much about winnin' as it is tryin' to straighten out a few things. Some nights while I'm goin' on about it I get to the place I say: 'Why do I even keep tryin'? There's probably nobody out there listenin' anyway. He sure never gives any indication he's heard me."

It may have been the first time I had ever said the word 'he' – referrin' to God – without holdin' a capitol 'H' in mind. I guess like Frankie, my life was changin' up, too. Neither of us chose to pursue that line of conversation, but the few words he had said on the topic, indicated to me his experiences had changed his beliefs in big ways – why else would daddy and mamma not want him to share them with me? I told him I'd

become a thinker in my own right. I hadn't come to decisions about it all yet, but I was no longer willin' to just believe what I was told I was supposed to believe. For me, it had been a more important exchange than either of us understood at that moment. It was permission to think for myself – not that I hadn't been, but actually hearin' Frankie give his permission was a big deal.

I put the plates and glasses in the sink for later. He didn't get up, so I wasn't sure how to proceed.

"I have one more thing to say about stuff between us, Mike."

He motioned me to sit back down. I had no idea what was coming. From the tone of his voice I couldn't tell if I should be eager or reluctant, pleased or frightened. He began. I sat on my leg like I figured it wouldn't take all that long.

"I can understand how you really wanted to read my letter, and I also understand you did. It wasn't anywhere to be found when I went lookin' for it after you left. I see it's been returned. Like I said, I fully understand your interest, but we need to cut a deal right now – the grownup deal between us. My stuff and doings are my stuff and doings, and your stuff and doings are your stuff and doings. Private. Can we agree to that as brothers?"

Stupid, stupid, stupid me; I began cryin' like a little kid, and even stupider me, I stood up and went to him expectin' to feel his big arms wrap me up like they had done so many times when I was younger. They were still there for me. I felt his big arms pull me in tight. Right there had always been one of my very best safe places. It lasted for a long time. With his talk about our grownup deal, I figured it was probably the last time I'd ever be there, so I drew it out for as long as possible.

"So, a deal?" he repeated, requirin' an answer.

I nodded.

"A deal. I'm sorry about readin' it. I've been so worried about you I thought maybe I'd learn something, so I could help you."

"I already understood that. A big brother never had a little brother who loved him more than you love me. It goes

both ways, you know."

Again, I nodded. He released me. It seemed so final. It was like the rope that held the fishin' boat to the pier at the lake had been untied, and I was suddenly driftin' out there all by myself on a huge body of water with the clouds rollin' in and the wind pickin' up and winter just around the corner. It left an empty space I would feel for years. The day it felt full again, I supposed I was a man.

I figured what I'd just agreed to didn't extend to meddlin' in less personal ways I thought would be helpful. I've said how I liked Russ. I hated it that Frankie and the other boys had left out for the army with such bitter feelin's against him. They'd been friends for always – not secret-tellin' close, maybe, but Saturday night hangin' out at the park close.

"Since dish washin' means standin', how about I finish out the day with mamma and you go help out daddy – if you're feelin' good enough to do anything?"

"That's a good suggestion – thoughtful. I'll be back on track by tomorrow."

We walked together, seein' the café and the fillin' station was joined at the hip, so to say. I stopped at Gramma's and Frankie moved on to the station. I watched him. It sure wasn't the same Frankie who'd run the streets of that town for eighteen years. I sighed and went inside, knowin' any minute he'd be comin' face to face with Russ. I hoped it worked out okay. What I *really* hoped was that it didn't work out terrible. My intentions were good, but I had learned years before that good intentions – ill-conceived – often weren't enough to make somethin' work.

"Bus the place up, first, will you honey?"

I preferred that to dishes, so was pleased to take care of it. The place was empty. I hadn't broken a dish all summer – a huge record for me. Mamma attributed it to me havin' become 'more careful'. That seemed way to obvious to mention, but I didn't bring it up. Anyway, I was savin' my arguin' energy for later that night.

By suppertime at the cafe, Frankie seemed easier about things. He and daddy talked some about him helpin'

with some body work on Miss Wilson's old Chevy. She insisted she didn't know how the rear fender got banged up. From what they said, the indentation looked a lot like the light pole at the end of her lane, so they thought *they* had it figured out. Daddy said a half hour with the rubber mallet should make it good as new. They even chuckled about it. I took that as a really good sign about Frankie. Mamma must have, too, 'cause she didn't say a thing. She didn't like us makin' fun of anybody and normally would have had a comment or at least a look.

Frankie spoke to me about Russ. I guess I wasn't expectin' that 'cause I sort of tensed up when he first said his name.

"Russ says you and he have sort of grown close the past few months. That's good. He's a good guy."

That was it? 'He's a good guy'. Nothin' left about his shirkin' his duty. Nothin' left about him bein' unpatriotic. No, 'cluck, clucks' or wing flappin' left? That's what we'd been hearin' before. I was relieved, but I sure didn't understand – not from a guy who'd been puttin' his life on the line over there while Russ had been sittin' all safe and sound here in Lords. I was pleased, but I was dumbfounded. I'm not sure how I thought it would turn out – forcin' the two of them together – a fight maybe? Even in Frankie's fragile state, hoppin' on one leg he'd have cleaned Russ's plow. I was glad it hadn't come to that. I wondered what had prompted the change of heart. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe he just figured since Russ had become my friend, he shouldn't badmouth him to me. That sounded like my brother.

I had several other takes on it, also. Frankie had been there, and he had seen how it was, what war demanded of a soldier. Maybe he understood Russ couldn't have handled it. Maybe he understood how it tore a guy up inside – even one as strong as my Frankie. Maybe he'd learned about how it was to have to live in constant terror and didn't want to wish that onto anybody, let alone a sensitive kid like Russ. I figured some mix of all that was probably true. One thing seemed clear; I had done a pretty dumb thing without givin' it nearly enough thought. It was becomin' obvious that I had no idea

how to be a big kid.

It made me wonder about myself. I tried to think about how I'd be when I got to be 18. Could I take it? I had no idea, of course, because I had no way of knowin' what I'd need to be takin'. I wanted to think I was a lot like Frankie, but in reality, I was probably more like Russ – not a coward by any means but soft hearted to a fault. Mamma had pointed it out to me – cautioned me about it you could say.

Marlon's letter gave me the only firsthand information I had about how it was to be there – war. He wrote that the patrol had stopped to eat and drink and rest after comin' off a five-hour battle. One they apparently won. I guess you knew who won by which side had killed the most boys on the other side. He said the oldest one left in their platoon at that point was eighteen – like Frankie. Two of the boys was standin' guard ten yards away. Suddenly, a half dozen young Italian soldiers appeared from out of the trees and opened fire. He said their four, MG-34s were sprayin' 300 bullets a minute at them, and it was all over before his platoon could return a single shot. He was wounded in the upper back and he just lay there on his stomach playin' dead – figurin' he *would* be any minute at the rate he was bleedin'. He said the Italian boys walked around among them firin' a few more shots. He was sure he was next. He tried not to breath. They left as quick as they'd come. I figured those few more shots were to make sure all of them were really dead. It's what I threw up over – those terrible, terrible images. I threw up until I figured my stomach would be comin' up next. My insides still really hurt from it.

He said one other thing in the letter that bothered me even more, and it's the image I just can't get out of my head. He said that fire fight was just the reverse of the time when Frankie was with the platoon, and it had come upon a large group of Italian soldier boys bathin' in a stream – apparently one of the times Frankie earned a medal for bravery. I hadn't known about the medals. I couldn't understand how a person could be called brave if he was just standin' on the shore killin' off unarmed boys, trapped there naked, waist deep in water by sprayin' them with 300 bullets a minute. Like I said, it was the

worst of all the images – Frankie doin' that.

I guess my reaction was showin'.

"What's the matter, Mikey. You don't look well."

It had been Frankie.

"Do I need to take you home?" daddy asked.

Mamma came over and felt my forehead.

"He's not warm."

"Just a long day in this July heat, I suppose," I came back, not about to share what had been terrorizin' me inside my head.

I began pokin' at my creamed corn and my appearance must have returned to normal. All the fussin' over me had distracted me from the terror playin' out inside me. The conversation continued in a cordial manner. Oh, things had changed between our parents and Frankie – we all saw that. Their talkin' was clearly relatin' among grownups. I supposed it would take a little time for the new arrangement to get worked out. That new arrangement apparently included me and Frankie, too, accordin' to things he'd said to me earlier that afternoon. I wasn't hungry but ate to keep away any more questions. I still thought it was terrible of that boy to write those things to Frankie. Or, maybe it was just terrible that I had read them. That would put it on me, not Marlon.

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CHAPTER SIX:
The Unimaginable

Sometimes durin' the night, Frankie would get dressed and go down the stairs. I had watched out the window and saw him walkin' across the back lawn – headin' for the creek, maybe. I never asked him about it. He was always in his bed when I woke up in the morning. I guessed he was havin' trouble sleeping. Maybe nightmares like my friend told me about. At least he didn't get violent with them.

Another week went by – the first week in August arrived. That marked two thirds of the summer vacation gone. School would take up on September 15th. I'd seen Frankie's knee sometimes when he was laying' on his bed, asleep. The scabs were all gone. Scars had taken their places. I wondered why he hadn't got us started on his rehab. I didn't ask. I had arrived at the place where I didn't want to rock his boat. It was clear that some of the goals he had set for himself when he first got back were no longer a priority for him. I waited for him to come to me. The, 'his stuff was his stuff,' thing.

I could tell his general frame of mind had gone downhill – I didn't have other words to describe it. Instead of makin' plans and takin' steps to get on with his life he seemed to have slid into neutral, withdrawin' even maybe. I supposed daddy and mamma had also noticed. I hadn't said anything to them about my observations. It had only been a short time

since he had returned. I had heard a program on the radio that talked about how hard it was for lots of soldiers to readjust to civilian life, so I figured it was normal. I had heard once that 'time heals all things'. I hadn't bought it at the time, but I was beginnin' to give it a second look – at least it held out hope and it seemed to me that's what the world needed right then – hope.

One night I decided to follow him and see where he went. I had no intention of meeting up with him – just gather information. I was worried about him and I figured *that* was the point where his stuff became my stuff. I waited until he was halfway across the back lawn before I made my move. I arranged my pillows under my sheet to make it look like I was in bed. Not sure why. I knew the woods well, havin' played in it for most of my eleven years. I had been right. He walked the creek south, not an easy route to maneuver with crutches – especially, carryin' the gunny sack like he was. I had no idea what might be in it. Maybe writin' supplies – he liked to write. Maybe a snack. Maybe a towel for after swimmin'. Maybe he was usin' swimmin' to rehab himself. I'd heard it was good for that. I stayed way behind and off into the woods a few trees.

Odd, I thought, as we neared the swimmin' hole – Russ was sittin' there. He raised his hand – not much energy behind it. Frankie returned it. Clearly, they were expectin' to meet. Frankie managed himself onto the grass and eased back against my 100-year-old oak tree. He faced Russ, who was reclinin' in the grass. He changed positions – onto his side, head in his hand, elbow in the grass, looking up in Frankie's direction.

It wasn't a quiet spot. The white water just on downstream filled the air with its distinctive sorts of sounds – some swishing, some splashing, even some clatter. It was more than enough to cover any sounds from my movement into a position behind bushes. In the end, I was not ten feet from them. I couldn't see them, but I could hear them. I settled in.

It wasn't until I found myself there eavesdroppin' that I first wondered if maybe I shouldn't be there. Was I hedgin' on my promise to Frankie? I supposed that depended on what I

might hear, and how could I know that until after I heard it. I was comfortable with that logic.

"Last time we were leadin' up to our secrets," Russ said apparently continuin' their conversation from some previous time.

"We were. Still want to lay them out?"

"I've thought it through, and I need to do it. It's your decision about yours, but I can't just keep it all inside anymore. It may not seem like much to you, but it's grown into the biggest thing in my life."

"Okay, then. I'm at the same place," Frankie said. "Want to flip a coin to see who goes first."

"I'll go unless you want to, Frankie."

Frankie must have motioned him to go ahead, because Russ started talking.

"I'm a coward, Frankie. I'm afraid to die. I'm a terrible person. I'd rather have us lose the war than to go risk my life defending my country. That must be the lowest kind of man there can be. I can't understand how you can do it. I listened to a retired army colonial speak some months back and from the figures he gave out, I figured one out of every 35 men in the war will be killed. That becomes one in every 20 men who actually go into combat. So, I figure if a person goes into battle twenty times, one of those times he's likely to be killed. Just 20. How many battles were you in?"

"Hundreds, if by battle you mean every time us and the enemy started a new round of shooting at each other. Sometimes two or three times in one day. Most battles are made up of lots and lots of skirmishes, so it's hard to answer your question. Once on the front line not a day went by without we traded fire."

"How did you do it? How did you keep from being scared silly?"

"I didn't. I was scared constantly from the moment I first learned how to lob a grenade in boot camp, and it came home to me from that moment on I had just one purpose – to kill other boys. Once you're in battle you just do it. It doesn't matter what you're feeling. Out on the line, every time I was

given an order, no matter the words, I heard, 'Okay, kid, it's your turn to go get yourself killed – every time I heard that. But I did it because I was a soldier, wearing the American uniform. It was like *I* wasn't *anybody*, anymore. I was just a tool. I got to thinking of myself like a tool and tools don't get scared. I was a tool that only had one purpose: keep killing the enemy until they killed me. I never looked beyond the next battle because it was likely I wouldn't be there to consider anything. It was like I was already dead from the start; I just hadn't finished dying yet."

"That's terrible."

"Yes, it's terrible. *You* being scared, is no different from every man on the line. We were all scared of dying but doing our job somehow erased that while we were fighting. I'm sure I'm explaining it badly, but I don't know how else to say it. You know you're terrified, you turn it off, you go kill people."

"They say war is hell."

"Oh, war is worse than hell, Russ, and don't let anybody tell you different. If your sent to hell it's all orderly – you know you're going to get burned up, you get there, you get burned up – it's all predictable – it's all according to the plan. In war, for the soldier on the line there is no orderly plan. Maybe you'll die within the next few minutes. Maybe you won't. If you don't, then maybe it'll be in the *next* few minutes. It's minute by minute with no plan – nothing orderly. It's like you *are,* but you *aren't*. You don't really expect to see tomorrow. All of life is just in that second. It's all you pay attention to. You carry your 'good-bye to your loved ones' already written in your back pocket.

"But then, you don't get killed. And you come home, and people expect you just slip back into order – their order – an orderly life – a life with a long-term purpose – that you will suddenly start working toward some purpose when for all those months in war you had no right to have your own purpose – an individual purpose."

"As terrible and horrifying as that sounds, none of that changes anything about *me*, Frankie. I'm a coward. I won't ever ask you to describe how is to kill somebody, but I can't imagine ever bein' able to do that. For me to go into battle

would just be suicide, plain and simple. I'd walk up the hill and just stand there while the enemy killed me a hundred times. I guess that's what I have to tell you. I should die for it – letting somebody else go over there in my place to get killed. I understand if you can't respect me. Hell, I don't respect me, how can I expect anybody else to?"

"I'll say this once, Russ and I'll never explain it, Okay? I understand everything you've said. I can't disagree with anything you've done. If you're going to go on in this life, you got to find a way to love yourself. The end."

"Thanks, I guess, for those words, but they are yours and not mine. My battle will just go on forever inside my head and my heart. I don't know how I'll be able to stand that – waking up every morning believing I should be dead. Maybe it was Tommy who got killed in my place. Maybe he should be here, and I should dead. You at least did your duty. You have that to look back on with pride, I suppose – fulfilling your duty, I mean, not the killing – I guess there ain't no difference, though, is there – you've made it plain your only duty was to kill the other boys. A thousand times a day I think about me being a coward. I don't know how I can live with that for the rest of a normal lifetime."

"Like I say, no more words about it. I guess it's my turn to offer my secret. You say you think you are behaving like a despicable human being. It is nothing compared to what I have done. I got a letter from a guy in my platoon. Aside from the Lieutenant, I was the leader – they were all kids like me, but they looked up to me more than they did to him. He'd give an order. They'd look to me. I'd nod. They'd carry it out.

"You have to understand. At the moment you take the oath, you also hand over your soul to whoever it is at any moment who from rank or station gives you your orders. It's no longer yours to control. The letter described how my platoon had been massacred. If I had been there, I believe I could have avoided it. The lieutenant had been killed. They behaved inexcusably recklessly without leadership. It didn't need to have happened. But I was here and they're dead."

"You're wounded. You couldn't be there. Stop blaming yourself."

I heard Frankie offer up the sigh of all sighs. He remained silent for just a moment like he was at a really important moment in his life.

"Here's the secret, Russ – my terrible, terrible secret. I'll need to put it in perspective.

"It's one thing to shoot a man who's trying to shoot you. I got rid of the guilt over that early on. But there were times I killed men just because they were wearing the enemy uniform. Sometimes they were looking the other direction – away from me – and didn't see me. I killed them. Sometimes they were unarmed, but I killed them anyway – I killed their uniform I told myself. Once, I came upon two dozen washing off the grime in a river. They were talking and smiling and probably having the first relaxed time in weeks. One of their lookouts spotted us and began firing. I was closest to the water. The rule was simple: when fired on, fire back and leave no survivors. I raised my weapon and I mowed them down where they stood, unarmed, waste deep in water, without giving it a second thought. I just looked down on them from there on the bank and kept my finger on the trigger until my weapon could no longer fire. The barrel got too hot to touch. I stood there watching until the last screams stopped. When one of *them* called out, one of *mine* shot him. After it got quiet, I hitched my head to the others, and we moved on down the road with no more reaction than if we'd just stopped to take a group leak.

My stomach was churning. Killing was what soldiers did, so I couldn't understand how that qualified as a secret. I kept listening.

He remained quiet for a long minute before continuing.

"That night, I woke up with a start. It was the first time in months I had thought about me being me. I realized that inside I had been replaced by the soldier – the soldier who had only two purposes in life – kill the enemy and, secondary to that, stay alive so I could kill more enemy. I no longer made decisions based on right or wrong, good or evil, the ways I'd been taught. Killing became good and right – not killing became wrong and evil. There was no Franklin Rakes anymore – I looked – I really looked trying to find him that night – but he just wasn't there. My being no longer held those

wonderfully warm pockets of decency and love and compassion and helpfulness – all the things I had been striving to cultivate my entire life – all the things that had drawn smiles and words of approval back home. I decided then and there I'd had enough. I had to find myself. I had to purge myself of the heartless killer. That's who I had proved I was that day – nothing better than a heartless killer. Those boys I had slaughtered, all had moms and dads and brothers and sisters – wives and kids maybe, and I just shot them like they were quail or rabbits. There would be no more boys killed by my hand.

"I stood and walked into the woods with my weapon, and with not a second's hesitation, I blew away my knee. That's what your local hero did. I took myself away from the war, away from my platoon, away from my responsibility to save those eleven boys who had come to depend on me. Don't try and tell me I am blameless in their deaths. I killed them. I'm as guilty as if I had pulled the triggers against them.

"Earlier, in the dark of that night, I found myself facin' an unresolvable dilemma: stay and go against every decent fiber of my bein' and kill another boy, or ten, or a hundred or more and advance along my path to becomin' a recognized, patriotic hero, or, take myself out of the action and lose all self-respect as a soldier – as an American. I'd have to hate myself if I stayed. I'd have to hate myself if I left. There is no good person left inside me, Russ. I'm a bad soldier. I'm a bad American. I'm a bad human being on both of those fronts. There can never again be the Frankie boy who left Lords to save the world. I can be of use to nobody. I've tried, and I can't. Dozens of times every day, I see the faces of those helpless boys in the water lifting their terror into my eyes as I reduced them to nothing more than targets – no longer human beings worthy of life."

Again, there was an extended silence between them. My T-shirt was soakin' wet. My cheeks stung. My lips and cheeks and chin trembled uncontrollably. Finally, Russ tried to pick up the conversation.

"So, we've each found ways to ruin our lives. At least we've proved one thing about ourselves – we're aces when it

comes to turning ourselves into empty shells – alive but unable to live."

Comin' from Russ, that had been profound. He certainly had been thinking about it – dwelling on it.

They sat without more words for a long, long time. I wanted to run to them both and tell them they were alive and lots of people needed them – that they were so much more than their mistakes or fears or problems. I wanted to pass on my daddy's advice and just be patient for their heads to clear. I didn't. I made my way home and somehow managed to get to sleep. I think it came, because I couldn't stand being awake with those horrible scenes Frankie had painted.

In the mornin', I woke up exhausted, of course. My pillow was wet. I looked across at Frankie's bed. Apparently, he was already up and gone. I had slept in until eight o'clock, probably a first for me. I got dressed and ran to the café, expectin' one of two things: to find Frankie elbow deep in dirty dishes or a sink full waitin' for me. Oddly, it was neither. There was a hand-written sign on the front door – *Closed for the rest of the week*. I was puzzled. I went on to the fillin' station. Bart Roland was helpin' a traveler at the pump. I looked inside for daddy, needin' information. He wasn't there.

As I turned to go back outside, Bart was comin' in. He walked by me and put the half dollar in the register.

"Let me walk you to your Aunt's place, Mike. She has something to tell you."

My odd start to the day was quickly turnin' to somethin' beyond strange.

"What's goin' on, Mr. Roland. Where are daddy and momma?"

"They're fine. Connie will explain."

With nothin' bein' far from anything else in Lords, we were soon there. Bart motioned me to go inside. Impatient and troubled, I bounded up the steps, ready to get things straightened out there and then. She was standin' near the door as if waitin' for me. Aunt Connie was never standin', anywhere. She reached out for me. I could tell she had been crying. I went over to her and she pulled me close.

“I need you to be strong, Mikey. There is very bad news in Lords this morning. Frankie went to be with God last night.”

I raised my voice.

“Say it out straight – that could mean he got baptized or it could mean he’s dead. Say what it is.”

My tears had begun in anticipation of the worst and more likely of the two possibilities I had laid out.

She pressed my head against her and just held it there for a long time without speaking. Then:

“He is dead, Mikey. Bart found him down at the creek this morning. Russ was there with him. Russ has a broken shoulder. He seems to have lost his mind. He just squats and rocks back and forth, mumbling, pleading with whoever approaches him to please kill him. It is dreadful. Nobody understands.”

“How? Was it a fight? How did Frankie die?”

“Now you really have to be strong, Mikey – more than’s reasonable for a boy your age.”

“Please just say it. Please!”

“He hung himself with a rope he had apparently taken with him in a gunny sack. There were two lengths, actually.”

For the first time, I snugged my arms around her and held her tight.

“Where’s daddy and mamma?”

“They’re with pastor, making arrangements.”

“Funeral arrangements?”

I felt her nod. She’d run out of words. Later I would thank her for the way she broke the news – first lettin’ me know I was loved – her arms around me – and then for just sayin’ it straight out when I asked to hear it that way.

“What am I supposed to do, now?”

I meant until daddy and mamma got back. It struck me that I didn’t know where they were.

“Where *are* daddy and mamma?”

I separated from her.

“At the parsonage, over in Davis. I’m sure they thought they’d be back before you woke up. They left you a note on

the kitchen table that told you to come here. You didn't find it?"

I shook my head and pulled away.

I knew it wasn't fair to Aunt Connie the minute I decided, but 'fair' was suddenly meaningless. I bolted for the door and ran home. I ran up the stairs to our room and closed the door. I looked at my bed. I looked at Frankie's. I bellied down on his and let the cryin' begin in earnest.

I should have known – from the things I heard them saying. Why didn't I go to him right then and tell him I'd make everythin' better for him? Because I had no idea how to do that. He didn't either – I understand that now. Also, I supposed because I didn't want him to know I'd been spyin' on him. I had let how I wanted him to think of me interfere with savin' his life. There wasn't a square inch of me that was worth a plug nickel.

I should have been concerned about Russ, too, but I wasn't. My Frankie was dead. Worse than that, my Frankie had taken his own life. And *even* worse than that, I hadn't tried to stop it. Nothin', out of all the things that I had tried to help make life back in Lords good for him, had worked. I knew he wouldn't have let me do such a thing to *my*self. He'd have known, and he'd have stopped me. I had been a terrible brother to the boy I loved the most in all the world.

At times like that, for an eleven-year-old, there was no logic to apply. At times like that an eleven-year-old truly believed he should have been able to have stopped it – have fixed things. At times like that, an eleven-year-old felt dead inside himself, with no intention of ever tryin' to change that. I could see no further ahead than just lyin' there on my brother's bed.

I heard the front door open downstairs. It reminded me there was a world out there away from me there on that bed. There was no world or future I wanted to contemplate – one without Frankie. I made no move to alter my position.

"I heard daddy comin' up the stairs. I called out the most terrible thing any son ever offered up to a parent"

"Go away. I'm tryin' to die, here."

He didn't go away. I knew he wouldn't. I didn't know if

that's how I really wanted it or not. He opened the door and came in, takin' a seat on the edge of the bed near the headboard. He didn't say anything. Presently he pulled me close and arranged my head on his lap. He stroked my hair. We just sat there like that for a long time – just lettin' the silence between us begin the healin'.

Eventually he spoke.

"Mamma needs us, Mike. I imagine she's sittin' on the steps, just outside."

I had forgotten about her. I felt ashamed. I raised my head just enough to call out, "Come in, Mamma."

The door opened, and she entered. Daddy gentled me into a sittin' position on the edge of the bed. Mamma sat on the other side. I felt her arm slip around my waist as she scooted close. Daddy's was around my shoulders. I lay my head against mamma. It should have been the very safest place in the World for me.

It was. How could the safest place in the world do so little to comfort me?

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CHAPTER SEVEN:
Words Across Time

Parson told me it had been the biggest funeral in the county's history. I'm not sure if that was intended to comfort me. It didn't.

Perfect strangers told me he'd been a fine human being. They didn't even know him.

Willie, in his simple way, probably summed it up best. "He lived, and he died. He loved you and you loved him. Like everybody, he was in charge of himself. He don't owe nobody no explanations."

I chose not to see him in his casket. I wanted to remember him how he was the last time I saw him to talk with him – at the kitchen table – just me and him – talkin' brother to brother – for the first time, really, man to man.

Mamma opened the café a few days later. Daddy went back to tendin' the garage. It freed up Bart to get back to tendin' his farm. I helped with the next haying. I handed the half dollar back to him – for the help he'd been to my family. He refused it.

I found that most people avoided mentionin' anything that had to do with Frankie. That was not how it should have been. Frankie was a person worth rememberin'. I brought him up every time I could. People probably got sick of it, but at the time I thought I was doin' right by his memory.

I stopped yellin' at God. Soon, I stopped even botherin'

talkin' to god. It took me over a week to get up the courage to go back to the swimmin' hole – to my big old oak tree where it had all happened. I'm sure if he'd have known I thought of it as *my* tree, he'd have not used it.

I had been hearin' things – bits and pieces – here and there – and puttin' them together. Here's the way I made sense of it. Frankie and Russ ended up makin' what you might call a suicide pact – a mutual life endin' ritual, for those who believe kinder words make it a kinder act. They're wrong, of course. The *act* defines what words are needed. Easin' up by usin' softer, less accurate words never change the guts of an act.

I believe *this* is the truth of the matter. After I'd forced them to be together in the garage that day, they recognized somethin' of their childhood relationship they were ready to focus on again. That led to lots of serious conversations between them – probably about life and livin' it – probably avoidin' the contentious weeks leadin' up to the enlistment. I've come to see that thinkin' and sharin' together about serious problems can go two ways: it can be a help to each other – puttin' things into a helpful perspective and even findin' solutions; or, it can work to prove to one or both of them how senseless life really is and send them into a downward spiral, I think it's called.

I believe *their* talkin' worked that second way. It might have worked that way even without the talkin'. I learned a good lesson there. If I ever get really down – depressed – I sure won't pick some other down and depressed person to share about it with.

Anyway, after all their sharin' and talkin' and postulatin' and lookin' at things from all the angles they could think of, they gave up on life and made plans to end theirs. The sheriff had reconstructed that final part this way. Frankie brought two nooses to the creek that night – undoubtedly agreed to ahead of time by the two of them. Both of the ropes were found tied to the branch of my oak tree – the lowest branch that spreads out over the water. They were attached six or so feet apart. The boys scooted out onto the branch, tied the ropes in place and put the nooses around their necks. Probably at some

signal – 'one, two, three, go,' maybe – they agreed to slip off the limb together. Frankie did, but Russ couldn't go through with it. After freeing his neck, he either fell off the branch or jumped and broke his shoulder. The fact that he had demonstrated once again what a coward he was, proved to be too much for him, and he snapped – I don't understand how that happens, but I know it does. Now, believin' that, rightfully, he's supposed to be dead, his whole focus seems to be on dyin' – him pleadin' with people to kill him – to do for him what he couldn't bring himself to do. I'm no head doctor, but that's what makes sense to me.

I haven't been to see him. I plan to talk with his daddy later today and see what he thinks I can do to help. Anyway . . .

Standin' there that first time, I studied the limb for quite a while. I remembered once when we were swimmin' and Frankie climbin' up, walkin' the branch, balancin' with his arms like a wire walker at the circus, out over the water and divin' it. As a little boy I thought that made him the bravest boy in the world. Now, I realize it only made him a typical, risk-happy, teen-age boy with very poor judgement. I'd been up there. On a dare, I'd even scooted out to the end and slipped off feet first into the water. It made me somethin' of a hero among the other nine-year-olds – that, of course would have been Willie.

The ropes had been taken down, of course. I had an intense urge to sit where he had sat that last time. I climbed and sat. Not knowin' where he'd been, I scooted a few inches and stopped and repeated that out to the water's edge. Somewhere in there I had done it. I climbed back down – it was a twelve-foot jump and I wouldn't risk that.

I *could* sit back against my tree knowin' it was where he had been sittin' that night. I sat there for some time. Ol' Blue arrived. I had to smile. It was like he knew I needed him. He had no way of knowin' that, I supposed, but anyway, I was happy he had showed up. He nuzzled his chin up onto my lap. I reached out and scooted him in close.

Sleep had been hard to come by since that horrible mornin' at Aunt Connie's. It had been the same for daddy and mamma. I often smelled their coffee brewin' in the middle of

the night and heard them talkin' at the kitchen table. I couldn't make out their words. I could have if I'd have opened my door but what was their business was best left their business. I knew they were terribly sad – Aunt Connie called it, devastated. Never havin' been a parent I knew I couldn't know *how* sad. I figured it was close to *my* sad.

I hoped they didn't blame themselves for what he had done – wonderin' back about whether they'd made the right decisions about raisin' him durin' those late evenin' talks at the kitchen table. I didn't know how parents thought, so I had no idea how to help them through their grief. They'd said it wasn't my responsibility. Of course, it was – we were family. Blue and I decided the best thing I could do was just keep on bein' the best person I could be. Frankie'd been Frankie. I needed to be me.

I'll give Parson credit for one good thing. I had once asked him how I could figure out *who* I was. He said, everybody has certain calls to action they feel inside. They say, 'do this or do that', or 'don't do this or don't do that'. Add up all those calls and you'll have a pretty good idea who you are. I really have to thank him for that. All in all, I've been awfully hard on that man. More and more, I'm seein' that he has a really difficult job, defendin' god. Goodness knows he tries. I really must thank him for that one thing, at least.

Blue and I stayed for most of an hour. I may have dozed off for a time. It had been one of the most difficult things in my life – gettin' up the nerve to get back to the creek. It was Willy who pushed me to do it. He said every day that passes will make it that much harder. Frankie had said somethin' like that once – 'if somethin' needs doin', get right on it. There's nothin' about passin' time that'll make it get easier.'

A rabbit hopped out of the thicket and on down the path toward town. Ol' Blue lifted one ear and followed it with his head. Time was he'd a been up and after it like a . . . well, like a dog after a rabbit.

On the way back to the café that mornin', me and Blue stopped by Russ's place. His dad repaired things – washin' machines, refrigerators, clocks, small motors, most any small mechanical thing that could get broken. He worked out of his

garage. In the summer the big doors were always open when he was inside. They were open.

"Mr. Madison. Good morning. Looks like lots of work piled up."

"Hello, Mikey. It is sort of gettin' ahead of me. Hard times at this house."

I was glad he had brought it up, because I wasn't sure how to.

"Anything I can to do to help – with Russ I guess I mean. He and I've been growin' close these past months."

"I know. Russ talked about you a lot. He's not a pretty sight, son, but if you want to see him, sure. Knock on the kitchen door. Mamma's fixing lunch. Russ ain't been eating. Skinny. Always was skinny, but nothin' like this. He resembles a mop a red hair on top of a bag a bones. Has stopped talkin' entirely. Like I said, you don't have to go through with it."

"Of course, I do. He's my friend."

It brought tears to Mr. Madison's eyes. That was the last thing I was tryin' to do.

I went to the door. It was open. Of course, it was open. It was August in Arkansas. I called in through the screen.

"Mrs. Madison. Mikey, here."

She came to the door dryin' her hands. She put on a smile – unpracticed recently, I knew. She seemed genuinely happy to see me and pushed the door open.

"Come in. Lunch in a few minutes. You talk with Russ's father about how he is?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm eager to talk with him. That plate for him? Your husband says he hasn't been eatin'. Let me give it a try. Can Ol' Blue come in? He and Russ get along real well."

I sort of laid out everything that was on my mind in one quick salvo.

Russ was in his room, sittin' in a straight chair starin' out the west window. He made no move to acknowledge me. After a minute or so his rockin' slowed. Blue went right to him and laid his chin on his knee. He whined – just barely. It was like a very gentle, 'Good morning. Hear ya aren't feelin' so

good.'

Russ reached out and put his open hand on Blue's head. Blue moved his chin in closer, halfway up his leg and sat there.

"I got food, Russ. Egg salad sandwich and apple slices. Looks pretty good to me."

I set it on the windowsill – about lap height and well within easy reach. He still hadn't looked at me. I picked up a piece of apple and moved it close to his lips. He pressed them tightly together and moved his head from side to side. At least I'd gotten a rise out of him. I needed – *he* needed – a whole lot more than that. I figured *what* he required was a good dose of Frankie Straight Talk – no holds barred, straight to the core of the matter, no pussy footin' around. It had lifted me out of funks on numerous occasions.

I pulled the other chair in close and turned his away from the window toward me. I scooted us knee to knee close. He stared out over my head.

"I am so ashamed of you Russ. Here I am needin' your attention, your time, your help and support, and what are you doin'? Sittin' here in your undies starin' out the window at absolutely nothin'. I'm the boy who lost his brother. That trumps any claim you have on him or your sadness because of it. You hear me? Look at you, your hair's a mess, you stink like roadkill, you're wastin' away to nothin', you got the people who love you the most worried sick, and it's all your fault. That's right. All *your* fault. You think Frankie would want you to just clam up like a selfish old . . . whatever, and ignore his little brother when everybody in the county understands he needs your help?"

Then I crossed my arms across my chest and pulled out the big artillery:

"So, big deal, you're afraid to die. 99.9% of folks are afraid to die – that fear we share just makes us all *normal*, you doofus. Your job in life is to be you – not Frankie or your daddy or some war hero or anybody else – just you and that includes any imperfections that come along with you. You're doin' one terrible job at it, I can tell you that. You got the power

in you to help us through all this. You are just about the kindest, gentlest, boy anybody in this town has ever known. So, you think you've let yourself down – maybe in some twisted way you even think you've let Frankie down. Frankie's *dead*, Russ. You *can't* let him down anymore. You *can* trample all over his memory though if you keep actin' like a self-centered dope.

"None of this is about *you*, Russ. It's about the grief everybody's sharin' here in Lords over Frankie – sharin', did you hear me? The rest of us are tryin' to help each other get through it – while you sit here most naked, stinkin' up the world and tryin' to prove somethin' by starvin' yourself to death. I thought you were so much better than this. I can't tell you how disappointed I am. My honest to goodness hope was that you and I could find ways to help each other get through this terrible tragedy. I need you so much."

Having exhausted my ideas on the matter, and surprised at some I'd thought to offer, I scooted my chair back, away from him.

"Come on Blue. It's clear, he'd rather sit here with his misery than be with those of us who love him and need him to be a part of our lives."

I got up to leave and put my chair back against the wall. I patted my leg for Blue to follow.

"Can Ol' Blue stay a while, please?" Russ asked still not lookin' my way.

I tried not to show my amazement.

"I guess that's between Blue and you."

I left. I'd held it together while I was with him, but I broke into tears as soon as I entered the kitchen. His mother put out her arms and we just clung to each other for some time. I pulled away – gently – and shrugged.

"I gave it a shot, Mrs. Madison. He asked for Blue to stay. Apparently Blue wants to. He didn't come with me. Shoo him out when he gets to be a nuisance."

"Thank you, Mikey."

She took my cheeks in her open hands and planted a gentle kiss on my forehead. I wasn't sure how to react, so I

smiled and nodded and left. I waved to Mr. Madison but didn't go to him – not wantin' to be put on the spot to offer an assessment of his condition. For one thing I didn't have one – well, sad and confused, of course. I hadn't known what *should* be done, so I did what I figured *could* be done. There was talk of takin' him to a psychiatrist in Little Rock. I knew they couldn't afford that – the cost of gas back and forth plus six dollars an hour for the doctor.

I'd also heard that Doc had sent a letter to the Selective Service certifyin' he was emotionally incompetent to be drafted. After seein' him, that made sense. I hoped 'incompetent' didn't have to be a permanent condition. I hoped havin' that on his record didn't destroy his chances at a good life – the blot, not his actual condition.

That night, after I kissed daddy and mamma and had gone up stairs for the night, I walked Frankie's side of the room for the first time since . . . I just touched some of his things – the bow, his old boots, his pillow. I came across a white, pasteboard, box that hadn't been there before. 6 X 8 X 2. I pulled off the lid. It contained a dozen or more medals. Each one was still pinned to the shiny cardboard piece it had come on. They each said what it was for. That told me they weren't important to him – just tossed into a box that way. Most soldiers wore their medals or arranged them under glass and hung them on their wall. They were proud of them and what they represented. Not Frankie. The only one I'd ever heard of was the Purple Heart – for bein' injured if I recalled properly. I replaced the lid and put the box back. I'd see that daddy and mamma got the box to do with what they decided was right.

I went to his bookcase – Frankie had been a reader – most every night before he turned off the light to go to sleep. He got me in the habit. That was a good thing he had done for me. I noticed one of his books hadn't been slipped all the way back into place, or maybe it had been slipped out a bit. I reached to even it up with the others and noticed the title: *Moby Dick*. I had read it several times. Frankie said it held the answers to many of man's most pressin' problems. I pulled it out.

"What's this," I asked out loud?

There was a long envelop stuck in its pages as if, perhaps, markin' a passage. I scanned the page. It seemed unremarkable. I turned the envelope over, realizin' there was somethin' inside. There was also writin' on the front.

"Mike. This message is from me to you – the you who will be prepared to read it on your 16th birthday – not sooner. Love – Frank."

I understood what Frankie was really saying: The contents of the envelope were goin' to be too complex or unpleasant for me to understand at eleven. I needed to mature five more years before I could, and, probably, before what it had to say wouldn't scare the bejeebers out of me. He knew I'd read it. He hadn't come right out and said I couldn't. It was his way of tellin' me to proceed with great caution and not overreact – not let it upset my life.

I went to his desk and picked up his letter opener – I never got letters so had no need of one. I supposed Frankie would be okay about me usin' his. I opened the envelope – with more care than I had ever opened one before. I figured it contained Frankie's last and best attempt to tell me things he figured were important for me to know. I fluffed up both of my pillows back against the headboard and settled in to read.

I removed the three sheets – handwritten in his best penmanship.

Summer, 1943:

Mike:

How I believe about the big things at the time of this writing.

If there is a god, he is not loving – he is either outright malevolent or at least uncaring. Look at the world he is allowing today for proof.

If there isn't a loving god, the world is without a rudder and will soon destroy itself in a rush of greed and deceit and pain and sorrow, and it will be engulfed in a

final catastrophe of man's own making – deliberate planning, even.

I'm not prepared to live in either world – one allowed to run amok by a careless power that has the authority to return it to love and peace if it only would, or the one that has to be guided by the skills available within the human species – things that never seem to win out for long over the evil instincts that keep boiling up deep within us all. Read history: the few years of peace on earth goodwill to men vs the decades of the rampant disregard for human life and wellbeing and the slaughter of millions. I'm betting one good year for every ten or twenty bad years.

If I were god, I would not have seeded men with both good and evil potential. I'd get rid of the evil. There is no possible way that can help – requiring that inner battle. To prove one's strength? How does having to wage that fight improve anything? Let's just be good people with the deepest and most genuine desires to make life wonderful for everybody. Having evil instincts can't improve the quality of living.

If I believed in the devil, I would have to believe he was far more powerful than god – again, just read the history books. I've heard it said that history proves good always triumphs. How can the killing of millions of soldiers ever be considered a triumph for good? How can displacing, wounding, killing, and traumatizing millions more innocent citizens – kids and the sick and the elderly – ever be considered a triumph for good? The triumph is always for evil while crisis after crisis lingers on.

I know you will be a force for good in the world, Mike. But why should there have to be 'forces' for good. Why can't there just be one universal force – good, itself? Whoever conceived of the human being – and I'm not at

all sure our species came about in any such intentional way – did an absolutely horrible job at it.

These are my thoughts. I'm sure they aren't Dad and Ma's thoughts. I'm sure they don't describe the beliefs of most of the people in Lords or this county or state or nation. Even if it makes sense at some level, most people are way to insecure to believe it's just us who are in this life together – alone, in charge of our own destiny, with no mythical being that's going to swoop down out of the sky and rescue us from our own, evil intentions – evil intentions he purposefully instilled in all of us, so we'd have to live miserable lives. Nothing about that can be construed to be loving.

I'm not trying to convert you to my beliefs, Mike. I'm writing this to help you understand how I have come to understand life – how I have come to believe life is a perfectly senseless undertaking that I didn't ask for. I am not about to do what I'm going to do on a whim or impulse or out of some helpless moment of depression. You <u>must</u> believe that.

I don't expect you to understand, or agree, or not grieve at my loss. To hurt the people I love, the way am about to, is an absolutely terrible and probably unforgivable thing to do. That should explain the depth of my belief – that knowing what I'm doing <u>to</u> you is still less important than what I am doing <u>for</u> myself.

I love you. It will be hard for you to believe that considering what I am doing to you, but in my own way, I love you deeply.

<u>P.S.</u> I know you're reading this right now – not waiting until I asked. I hope you will read it often and if you find errors in my take on things, please correct them for yourself. I really hope you can do that. Remember our deal: your stuff is your stuff and my stuff is my stuff. These takes on life, Mike, are part of <u>my</u> stuff.

It wasn't signed. I reread it a half dozen times that night. I didn't pretend to understand it, but I really wanted to, so I reread it – every paragraph, every sentence, every word, every syllable. My brother had meant for it to be somethin' positive in my life so that's how I was determined to take it – make it. I never looked upon any part of it as unintelligent or ill spoken. I thought of it as somethin' important to think about – to see if it held any truths for me. I remembered Frankie sayin' once – when I was badmouthin' pastor to him – that it was always important to listen and analyze and never approach some new or different idea by tryin' to write it off as illegitimate right from the start. Only people insecure in their beliefs did that. Seekers of truth always listened for possible new meaning. Some people were afraid they might hear somethin' that threatened what they believed and rather than investigate it to possibly improve themselves or their understeanding of life or the universe, they turned it off or pretended it didn't exist, so they wouldn't have to get uncomfortable or upset. I think he called it *cozying into intentional ignorance*. He said he'd read about it – studied it – like the people in our country not believin' Jews were bein' mistreated in Europe; if they didn't see it, it couldn't be happenin'. Frankie was a wiser boy than most people gave him credit for. Oh, he was leader but beyond that, he was wise. Lots of that probably had to do with his love of reading. That was one of his wonderful gifts to me.

At any rate, that's what I thought he'd said to me.

I wondered *why* he hadn't shared his beliefs with me before. I mean, I have always just assumed his were like daddy's and mamma's. I'm sure it was partly because his beliefs may have suddenly and drastically changed from his experiences in the war, so were relatively new. Partly because he wanted me to have the intellectual freedom to use my brain to make my own decisions about such things. Partly because, before, he didn't want to scare me. All those things told me how much he loved me.

Through the years, those three sheets would become smudged and worn into near illegibility, but that was okay. I had them memorized. What he said to me stayed with me. I

figured since he'd written somethin' for me, he probably had written somethin' for daddy and mamma, also. I never asked – nor did they. I hated that he was gone. I didn't hate *him* for bein' gone. I loved him for havin' been such an important part of my life. I loved him for trying to help me understand his final take on life

Thinkin' about it, he clearly still was an important part of my life.

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CHAPTER EIGHT:
Learn from the Past, but Leave it There

Several days passed. My parents noticed I had withdrawn a bit into myself. Mamma asked. I tried to answer without lyin'.

"Lots of things to think about," I said. "Lots of growin' up to get done. I only have two more years to prepare myself for high school."

I think she bought the first part – maybe the second part. I'm pretty sure she caught the fact I'd added the last part as a distraction. She said that thing parents say at times like that; "You know daddy and I are here if you want to talk about anything."

I smiled and nodded. I suppose it was some reassurin' that that part of things hadn't changed – mamma still bein' mamma. I wondered if they had said that – about being there for him – to Frankie since he'd come home. Daddy indicated he and Frankie had talked some. That was good.

I had been helpin' at the café since seven. It was ten. I looked up. I truly thought I was going to wet myself right then and there. Russ came up to the front door, opened it, and came inside. He nodded at mamma and then at me. He hitched his head toward the family booth in the rear corner. I looked at mamma. She nodded. I got out of the apron – somethin' Frankie had refused to wear – and joined the Rakes Family 'hand wipin' team'. I walked over to him, havin' no idea

what was about to happen, or just as importantly, what *had* happened. We slid in and took seats.

"Hey, Russ. Your hair looks great."

"I probably smell better than last time, too. I came by to say thanks to you – you and Ol' Blue."

"You're welcome."

What else could I say when I had no idea what I'd done. I mean it was obvious things had changed. It seemed Russ figured I had somethin' to do with that or he wouldn't be there offerin' thanks. I had nowhere else to go with the conversation. Fortunately, he did.

"You remember talkin' to me?"

I thought it a strange question. Maybe just an awkward way of bringin' up the topic.

"Yellin' at you is more like it."

He offered a quick, weak smile.

"Yeah – yelling. I heard your words, but I saw Frankie – they were really Frankie's words you know."

"Yes. I suppose they were. He gave me his treatment more than once."

"You said lots and lots of the right words, Mikey – Mike. I have replayed it over and over. I can repeat it word for word. I'll never forget."

I shrugged, no idea how to respond. Again, I wasn't required to.

"I'm not here to tell you I'm okay – that I'm all better – because I'm not – a far piece to go, actually. I'm frightened of everything. I still can't figure how I managed to get myself to come here this morning. I'm glad I did. Doc has somehow made arrangements for a doctor still in training, to come up from Little Rock twice a week to talk with me. He's going to become a psychiatrist – I think doc said he was a resident at some hospital – I have no idea what that means. Well, one thing it means is I'm going to start getting help – Pa and Ma could never afford it. Doc says this way it's all free – part of his training. I can't understand how I deserve that. Ma says God is shining on me. I don't know. As good an explanation as

any other, I guess.

"It scares me out of my gourd – Frankie used to say that. Give me a broken motorcycle and I know how to fix that. But fixing up a broken me is the most frightening thing I've ever had to face."

"I'm proud of you – that you're facin' that fear and gettin' on with your life."

I was pleased with that response but figured I'd shot all I had.

Mom approached with cherry pie and drinks.

"We have really missed having you drop in, Russ. This is such a nice surprise."

Mamma always knew the right way to put things.

He thanked her. We nibbled and sipped, recognizin' it would take some time to get things between us back where they had been. Maybe that would not ever be possible.

We quickly ran through weather as it topic, but it did allow me to mention I'd be hayin' with Bart.

"I'm lookin' forward to school startin' – seventh grade this year. American history."

"I may go back and do my senior year. Ma would like that, I know. Probably Pa, too, but he won't urge me one way or the other."

"Well, I will. I hope you go back. You're smart and you should fill that brain of yours with every scrap you can force inside."

He smiled for a second time.

"Sometimes you have the strangest way with words. Not a criticism, just a observation."

It gave me a chance to smile back – usin' up most of one whole second. I felt bad wishin' the conversation would come to an end. Why I was so uncomfortable I didn't understand. He had one final thing on his mind.

"I ain't been back to the creek. You?"

I nodded.

"That mornin' before I came to see you."

"Doc says I need to get back there and see that all the

bad stuff is gone, but I'm terrified at the thought."

He was askin' me to go along. What had suddenly made me the go to guy in town. It wasn't my job to replace Frankie. I wasn't Frankie. I was Mike. The whole idea aggravated me mightily.

Mom brought the coffee pot for him. He waved it off.

"I'm so happy to see your friendship getting back on track, boys. Please come often, Russ."

Okay, mamma, so *that* was the deal. We were friends and friends did for friends what friends needed. Suddenly, I *really* wanted to go with him. He hadn't asked me in so many words, still I said it.

"I'll be glad to go back with you. We can ease up on it – maybe fish the bank on the way. No pressure – just two friends doin' what two friends do in the summertime."

"That would be so nice. When?"

This boy wasn't lettin' grass grow under his feet. I knew mamma had been listenin'. It was a small room and she had mamma ears. She couldn't have missed it. I looked at her. She nodded. I figured that said, 'Anytime. I'll get things covered here.'

"How about two o'clock this afternoon. I'll come by for you. You live closer to the creek."

He stood up. I stood up. I felt like we should shake hands or somethin' – it hadn't been a bad time, but it was all so stiff and formal. Fortunately, he didn't offer, and I certainly didn't.

"I'll walk up the street with you. Need to check in on daddy. See how he wants to handle lunch, this noon."

I gathered up the dishes and put them in the sink.

I figured I'd just play it straight, like me and Russ being together was still commonplace.

"Hey, Daddy. Busy today?"

"Actually, yes."

He nodded at Russ. Russ nodded back. Daddy continued – mostly to me – also playin' it straight about Russ.

"Some sort of farmer's meeting over in Ft. Smith.

Maybe eleven dollars in gasoline alone. Be needing to pump from the reserve tank into the ready tank before sunset. The truck comes next Monday, so we need to run that tank down anyway. Can you handle that for me?"

"I can take care of it, Mr. Rakes," came Russ's unexpected response.

Daddy handled it straight out.

"Great. After five would be best. I'm expecting more vehicles making the return trip after the meeting. Get that reserve tank low as possible. By the way, your pay envelop is still in there by the register from the last week you worked. Be sure to take it. There's a mouse been eyein' it and I haven't got vermin insurance."

Russ chuckled. I thought I was going to lose tears down my cheeks seein' it. I managed to keep them in check. Frankie would have thought that was funny – keepin' my cheeks in check. We all went inside together. He hesitated takin' the envelop when daddy handed it to him. Not going to have any of that, daddy stuffed it in his shirt pocket and patted his bottom, sendin' him on his way. He'd got nothin' but same old, same old, treatment from daddy. That was good. I'd been leanin' in that direction, but the results of his full-out approach firmed it up for me.

We were alone.

"I came to get your order for lunch, but first I need to ask you a big question."

He smiled at me.

"Son, you have seldom ever asked a *small* question. What's on your mind? Is this a stand here, ask and answer question, or a sit on the couch and talk about things question?

"Sittin', I'm thinkin'."

We sat. I got right to it.

"Why do you believe in God?"

"Yes, I'd say that's a sit and talk about things question. Well, let me see. First, I suppose, is because my parents believed in God and that just became a fact of life for me. I never really had to even consider it. It was what folks did."

"But you're older now. You must have thought about it."

"Yes, I have. You won't be satisfied with my answer, but here it is: I *believe*, because I see no *better* alternative – not that I don't understand there are alternatives. Somehow this universe and its inhabitants had to get created. What I know of the universe – what my mind can comprehend of the universe – suggests that when things get created there is a process – a reason – some kind of a force behind it – a creative force. I grew up in a community that called that force, God. Theologians and anti-theologians have lots more to say about God than that, but I – or *any* human being – have no way of verifying what they say. As a human being, I feel vulnerable – you know that word – of course you do. Humans are fragile. It is comforting to believe that like a child has a parental protector looking after him, adults, also, have a protector looking after them. It provides a sense of security and safety and importance. I can't know for certain it is all true, but I have to live day by day by day and believing that there is likely some being somewhere that in some way has my safety and best interests at heart, is reassuring. It offers hope in times of despair or danger. Since I can't know for sure if there is or isn't a God, I choose to live as though there is – so I can live my life more comfortably and consistently.

"Like I said, you won't be able to accept that, and I'm not going to force you to – not even ask you to. My parents pretty well demanded it of me, but as a child I had no reason to question it so it posed no problem. Without seeking any proof, everybody I knew, just knew there was a God. Period.

"Interestingly, I had this very conversation with your brother the week he got home. You and him have some talks about it, did you?"

"No, Sir. Not really talks, although I'd be lyin' if I didn't admit some of the things about him – some of the changes in him – didn't make me wonder what he was thinkin'."

"Is there more? I'm not going to be able to satisfy you if your question really was something further about proving the reality of God. I can only suggest how I've come to my beliefs and where they stand at this time in my life. I won't argue to

defend my beliefs on logical or scientific grounds because I realize that is impossible."

"Thank you for bein' so straightforward about it and understandin' about my interest. I do have one more question: Do you believe people who do bad things are sent to hell?"

I had been thinkin' about Frankie and I was sure daddy understood that. Pastor said suicide was a terrible sin punishable by hell.

"The God I envision, is a loving, fatherly kind of being, so let me ask you: 'Do you believe a child's loving parent could, under any circumstances, bring himself to send his child to a place like hell?"

I nodded to indicate I understood his position. It was one of the best answers he had ever given me about any of my big questions. It didn't settle the issue in light of Frankie's concepts of choosing between no god and an evil god, but it really helped. Perhaps the biggest thing I took away from that talk was that there are things not even grownups can answer and that that's alright. It provided much more than a little relief. It made me question anybody who insisted they knew for certain about it all. I figured they must be the most insecure of all about it.

"So, the special, like always?" I asked, standin' and smilin'. He understood the takin' of his order had really played no significant part in my bein' there that mornin'.

"Sure. Why not give *that* a try for a change?"

It was worth grins between us.

We stood, and I gave him a hug. We hadn't hugged since our initial grief over receivin' the news about Frankie. It seemed to me hugs were good things and I, for one, had no intention of givin' them up.

I got to Russ's house a few minutes before two. I figured it had to come sometime so I might as well get it over with. I stepped inside the garage.

"Hot, humid, must be August in Arkansas," I offered as an ice-breaker – time-worn as it must have sounded. It was one of those time fillers in conversations that everybody accepted even though they were meaningless – sort of a

buffer between no conversation and the about to be conversation.

"It is, indeed. Russ showed me the pay envelope. That was really nice of your dad."

"My daddy's a fine man, but it was all money Russ had earned."

"Anyway, it meant a lot to my boy. My wife and I can't figure how you worked your magic, Mikey. She said there was yelling and carrying on like she'd never heard short of a revival meeting down at the Nazarene Church."

I suppose the smile I presented was sheepish.

"Didn't realize it reached that level."

"Never you mind about that. I'm thinking whatever it is, you need to bottle it for others who come up needing it."

"It was mostly Frankie's, 'tell it like it is at the top of your lungs', approach, Sir. It had worked on me lots of times. I didn't have any idea about the right way to help him, so I did all I knew to do."

He looked up to the sky. "Thank you, Lord, for Frankie Rakes."

It needed no follow-up. The idea that somethin' about Frankie was sort of livin' on in a helpful way, set my mind to thinkin' about such things. I'd take it up further, later that night. Now that I'd stopped harassin' god every evening, I found I had lots more time on my hands. I had to assume if he existed, he was appreciative of the down time he was gettin', as well.

"Russ said he was goin' to start talkin' with a doctor."

"Yes. Dear old Doc Morgan. I don't know how he done it, but he must have got on it immediately. Now *there's* a God sent *saint* for you – Doc Morgan."

"He's a local treasure, all right."

Geeze. Russ was right. I *did* say things in odd ways!

"Well, me and Russ have a short hike planned for this afternoon, so I better go tell him I'm here. Don't want him to think I ducked out on him."

"If you ever need anything, you come right to me,

Mikey. You hear?"

"Yes, Sir. I hear. That's very generous of you."

Russ was comin' down the back steps as I approached the house.

"Ready?" I asked, thinkin' it was just another one of those throw away phrases in a conversation that added no meanin' to it but sort of set the stage for whatever was to come next. It wasn't."

"Don't know if I'll ever be ready. Not sure it's a good idea. Already wet myself over it. Had to change."

"Hey. Look at it this way. We're just gonna walk the creek a ways. We can stop any time we want to. We can sit and dangle our feet in the water if we want to. We can find shady spots and lay back lookin' up at the sky makin' believe we see pictures in the clouds – I'll see cars and you'll see girls."

He definitely wasn't prepared for *that*, and he laughed out loud. That was twice that day – probably only twice in a week but still. I just began walkin' off. O'l Blue walked up and moved along beside me. Blue liked the creek on such hot days. I had to be careful where I let him get in. Some of the narrows offered too much current for his old body to handle, and he'd get tossed around. I figured that would scare him. I guess I really had no idea what scared a 70-year-old Blue Tick Hound – maybe another 70-year-old Blue Tick Hound named Tilly. I chuckled.

I was relieved when Russ caught up and was walkin' pace for pace beside me. He was hardly any taller than me – he as short for his age and I was tall for mine – so it worked. I reckoned I'd garnered a good supply of daddy's tall genes. That would have been funny if I'd have said 'coveralls' instead of genes. Frankie would have loved it. I realized that most folks wouldn't get it.

Russ spoke first.

"You think your dad will let me start covering for him noons again soon?"

"Don't know why not. You still know how to pump gas?"

"Sure."

“You still know how to collect a dime a gallon and put it in the register?”

“Sure. What you getting at?”

“I’m wonderin’ why you think daddy wouldn’t welcome you back.”

“I see. ‘Cause I’m a genuine, proven, mental sick bastard coward that everybody’s avoiding for fear they might catch it.”

“Are you implyin’ a sick bastard is worse in some way than just a plain, old-fashioned bastard?”

“I didn’t mean for you to have to say that word, Mike.”

“Guess you should have thought of that ahead of time. Clearly god didn’t dispatch me to hell for it, so I guess things are good. Who’s avoidin’ you?”

“Most everybody. I’m afraid they’ll start in on you about it if we’re seen together.”

“If they do, they’re stupid poop heads and believe me, I’ve been able to spot a stupid poop head since I was four years old.”

He smiled.

“You are so much like Frankie, Mike.”

I stopped us in our tracks and got right up in his face.

“Get this straight, Russel Madison. I am *not* Frankie. I am *not* a reincarnation of Frankie. I am *not* a substitute for Frankie. Frankie’s dead. This is me, Michael Rakes. I’m *not* dead. If we’re gonna make this work between us, we gotta get that straight. Deal?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry. One of my biggest problems is thinking I have to get the past back, just the way it was, before I can be me again.”

We moved on along the creek.

“You got to face one thing, Russ. You aren’t ever going to be the old Russ. I’m never going to be the old Mike. My parents are never going to be my old parents. Nobody in Lords is ever going to be who they were before my brother killed himself. You need to say that, Russ. Frankie Rakes killed himself. You can’t imagine the relief it brings just sayin’

it, just admittin' it to yourself. It was the moment I finally felt free to go on with my life – my new life without my main guy in the world."

"But I don't want to say it. That's like admitting things have to be different."

"Well, don't they? Aren't they? Haven't you been listening?"

He gave no response.

"Maybe you were better off sittin' in your underwear, suckin' your thumb and rockin' back and forth. I suppose that was safe and predictable. If you expect life to be safe and predictable you have no right tryin' to live it. That was my Frankie's mistake. He wasn't willin' to live in an imperfect world. No tellin' how many people he hurt out in the future because there won't be a Franky Rakes there for them to relate to, to have him help them, to marry him and raise a fine family and carry on the Rakes name and blood line."

My lip was quiverin'. I had pushed myself too far. There I was, sayin' things out loud I'd never even thought before – things I wasn't prepared to hear myself say. I wasn't ready to be everybody's Superman. I slumped down onto the grass, sittin' Indian style, bent forward and began sobbin' – chest-heavin' sobbin'. I thought I'd left that behind in the grass under the Town Limits sign. I suddenly realized I would never leave that behind. Russ took a seat next to me and put his arm around my back. It was exactly what I needed. Come to find out, it was exactly what *he* needed. Later, I could see it so clearly. He had begun the transition from demandin' help, to offerin' help. I could almost feel the change begin in the way he positioned his arm – the tentativeness fadin' and the confidence – the strength – fallin' into place. We sat there heads together for some time. Finally, it felt okay to be the little kid again even though I understood it was only temporary.

Eventually, we moved on and arrived at the swimin' hole. Russ wouldn't go so far as to climb the tree, but he sat where Frankie had been sittin' on the ground. He spoke. I was glad since I was drained and had nothin' to speak about. There was somethin' about him takin' the lead that provided a great relief that afternoon.

"I been thinking," he said at one point, "the men who are in charge of this war – the one's demanding that boys go off and kill each other – don't have any idea that me and you even exist, and yet look at what they're doing to us. They've saddened our families forever – *forever!* They killed Frankie even when he was thousands of miles away from the battles. I guess I can't say they did this to me, but if the war hadn't been raging, I'd have never been forced to go through it. What do they call the dead and displaced civilians after an attack – collateral damage. I figure that's what I am – collateral damage.

"I don't understand how you have become so strong, Mike – you're just a kid. What is there inside you that keeps you going and looking ahead like things are going to be okay?"

"I've thought about that, too, I've decided it has nothin' to do with my strength, Russ. Daddy and mamma raised me to always look ahead – daddy says learn from the past but leave it there; always move ahead. I'm just tryin' my best to do that. It's a fight every day, Russ, not to let the terrible sadness take over and crush me into a big, unrecognizable blob. I've been right on the edge several times – especially at night. Nights are the worst. Frankie would kick my butt if he knew I was reactin' that way. Not that Frankie is in control of me. Like he said: His stuff is his stuff and my stuff is my stuff. The way I have to see things now is to do my best to take care of my stuff and just let Frankie's fall by the wayside. I can't bring him back. Not sure I would/should even if I could – that would be me meddlin' in *his* stuff. What I *can* do is get my act together and live a good and decent and helpful life. Daddy agrees.

"Pastor said somethin' once that actually made sense. He said if you lived your life just for your own safety and enhancement, you'd end up alone with only a mirror and a wall for company. If you lived your life to improve the human condition, you'd end up behind a big window lookin' out over an endless chain of good deeds that bred more good deeds and you'd have a memory full of smilin' faces, better off because you lived. I wish Frankie could have understood that.

"Here's a difference between me and him, Russ. Aunt

Connie, of all people, pointed it out to me not long ago. She said Frankie had always looked out on the world and seen the huge, terrible, troubles that nobody could ever solve. She said I had always looked out on the world and seen a whole bunch of little troubles that I figured I could solve – one at a time. I believe she was right. When you look at things through my eyes you just have to see hope and wonder-filled possibilities. When you look at things through Frankie's eyes you're immediately overwhelmed and have to see hopelessness and despair. What person in his right mind, freely agrees to live out his life in hopelessness and despair? From his perspective he did the only thing that made sense."

"Will you help me find some of those little troubles that need somebody to work on – will you do that, Mikey?"

"Here I am, Russ. Go to work."

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CHAPTER NINE:
Now, THAT, was a Pear!

A trip out of town was a big deal in 1943. A trip out of town with just me and daddy goin' together was a bigger deal. I sort of felt like I was more or less just a stand-in for Frankie – he and daddy had gone places together on several occasions.

Russ was going to handle the station – it was Monday and Monday's were slow days. Most folks filled up on Friday or Saturday and just added a gallon now and then durin' the week. If it was in town, you walked. You had to have a ration stamp for every gallon so had to stretch them out for the whole month. Mamma said she'd see that Russ got lunch.

We were off to Bentonville – way up in the north west part of the state. I'd only been up there a couple of times. The prospect of an entire day alone with daddy had excited me so it made it difficult to sleep well the night before. It was a longer time in hours than in miles. By that I mean with the national 35 mph, war effort, speed limit, it took a long time to get not all that far. The reason for the trip was that daddy had been able to locate six brand new tires in several sizes to sell at the fillin' station. Tires were really hard to come by durin' the war. Doctors and fire departments could get them, but most everybody else had to wait in line. He said he already had three of them sold. Daddy said his profit would be ten times the cost of our trip that day. Mamma had packed us a lunch.

Frankie used to tell me how sometimes daddy would

stop at a farmer's produce stand and let him pick out a piece of fruit. He went for apples. We had apples from our tree at home, so I figured if givin' the opportunity I'd go with a pear or peach. Nothin' had been said about it, so my anticipation was really just speculation. Spendin' money on things that weren't essential didn't happen very often and I understood that – I wished it could be different, but I understood it.

I figured that right off the bat I needed to acknowledge my gratefulness about gettin' to go along.

"I'm really happy I'm gettin' to ride along. In three more years, maybe I can help with the drivin' like Frankie did."

It immediately brought up a question I realized I hadn't asked.

"Is it okay to speak like that about Frankie? I don't want to make you sad."

"It is fine. Frankie was a wonderful part of our lives. Your ma and I want to keep remembering every single thing about him. And yes, three more years and you'll be able to be sitting right here where I am. I look forward to that time, too."

Daddy and I didn't have to keep words flowin' back and forth constantly to be comfortable with each other the way Tilly did. She'd talk regardless if it made any sense or not. In my experience, girls were often prone to that affliction. Aunt Connie was the best example. Mamma not so much. She talked a lot, but she usually had important or entertainin' things to say. I wondered if that was one of the qualifications daddy had required when he went lookin' for a wife. He had sure picked out a dandy. I couldn't imagine a better mother. Truth be told, I might have talked as much as girls, but it was not somethin' I recognized at eleven. Anyway, what *I* had to say was always important.

I asked my question.

"How does a boy go about choosin' a wife?"

Daddy chuckled out loud.

"What?" I asked, puttin' on a smile over his reaction while not understanding any part of it.

"I never know what to expect when you open your mouth. I don't mean that's not alright, in fact I suppose it is

wonderful."

I shrugged. Actually, I guessed it was pretty nice – when I was just bein' me, daddy thought it was wonderful. He hadn't forgotten my question.

"Here's the thing, son. It's not so much a man goes looking for a wife. When that time comes, relationships just begin growing, naturally. Young people have already formed opinions about what they like and don't like in other people, so they just drift in the direction of the ones they know they're comfortable with. I met your mamma up in Fayetteville. She was in college and I was working with a master mechanic – one thing my dad did for me that was really fine."

That made it sound like my daddy and his daddy weren't always on the best of terms. I'd quiz mamma about that later. I continued to listen.

"She and I both worked part time at the same grocery store – me stocking shelves and her working the register. We did our shopping there after we closed for the evening – five o'clock. One night I had picked up a few things to take back to my room to eat and she'd picked up a few things to take back to her room, and I said the dumbest thing a boy has ever said to a girl – something like, 'Looks like if we put what you have there with what I got here, we could make a pretty good supper.'

It hadn't seemed dumb to me, but then I was eleven.

"And so, what did she say?"

"She said, 'I guess we could try that – I was planning on porkchops with sauerkraut."

"I was mostly just planning on a baked potato and green beans."

"That should work. My roommate works at the hospital 'til nine. We'd have to leave the hall door open or Mrs. Patchel will have a conniption fit."

"I like fresh air."

"That was it?" I asked.

"Well, that was the *start* of it. We saw a lot of each other during the next few months. We became very comfortable with each other. Her father died in May and she

had to leave college and go home. She grew up over in Davis. Her mother died a few months later – just withered away like it happens sometimes in cases like that. They were old when she was born – forty-eight if I recall properly. They died young. We were married a month later. When I returned to Lords from Fayetteville, my dad turned the filing station over to me. He owned fifty acres just west of the Roland farm and he was content to work it. He sold the larger farm I'd grown up on. I never liked farming and he knew it. We had words over it on more than one occasion."

"Back to my question. It sounds like you and mamma sort of chose each other. I didn't know it was like that."

"I think the best marriages *are* like that. I'm not sure what else to say about it."

"But you knew you loved each other, right."

"Oh, yes. We'd known that pretty much from the night of the sauerkraut and baked potato."

I smiled at the way he put it. He wasn't done talkin' like I figured he was.

"At your age, falling in love that way still doesn't make sense. Trust me and just be patient. Lots of wonderful changes are in store for you over the next few years. A person cannot really understand about that kind of love until it happens."

"How about with children – you don't get all that much time to get acquainted with them before you have to make a decision."

"Decision?" he asked clearly puzzled.

"To love 'em or not to."

"That is *never* a question, son. From the moment your ma and I knew we had a child on the way, we already loved him – or her, whichever, made no difference. Frankie was a small baby – a little over seven pounds. You were huge – almost nine pounds. Doc said we'd need to make a lumber Jack out of you."

For some reason that I most certainly did not understand, I gained a sense of pride for havin' weighed more than Frankie when I was born.

"How did Frankie do about me bein' born?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I would think havin' a new, helpless, cryin' and wettin' brother suddenly become a part of your life might be a very unpleasant thing. Babies take a lot of time and attention. I dropped in on Evy last week. It seemed to me everything about her life was suddenly about baby Frazier."

"That's the way it is when children come along – they become the most precious part of a parent's life and you just know it's your job and privilege to care for them and protect them 24 hours a day for many years."

"You still feel like that about me – the carin' for and protectin'?"

"Just about the most important part of raisin' kids is to help them learn how to do things for themselves – to be able to protect and take care of themselves. That develops gradually, so I'm not spending as much time protecting you now as I did when you were a little boy, but your safety is always on my mind."

"It's why you always keep track of where I am, huh?"

"Yes. You're aware of that, are you."

"I have this fantasy that every time I leave somebody's house or maybe even every time I pass somebody's window, there's a phone picked up and a report given to Aunt Connie who lets you or mamma know."

"It is one of the facts of life in a small town. We all take care of each other. Sometimes that invades a child's privacy, but it's intention is only to protect him."

"I've pretty well come to see that on my own, this summer. I think that's great, you know. I suppose there are other things like that about Lords I'll find out later on."

"I just suppose so. I'm glad you're okay with it."

"Oh, it's a lot more than okay – I'm really lucky to have grown up here. It's like everybody in Lords has helped raise me in one way or another – they've shared parts of themselves with me. I may have heard Frankie say that, once. Still. I mean it. Was it that way back when you were a kid?"

"Sure was. Towns like Lords are the backbone of our country, raising good, hard working people content to live simple, loving, lives."

"I have the idea my life is going to mostly take place away from Lords. The opportunities are pretty limited here and I don't mean it's not a great place."

"I understand. You have lots of time to make those kinds of decisions. Life often takes strange turns and we have to find ways of working with them."

I think I relaxed about some of my concerns, at least for a little bit. Findin' a wife wasn't going to be entirely on *my* shoulders. Learnin' to love my kids was a given, so that dropped out entirely. There were still lots of decisions to work out and plans to make but, like daddy said, I was eleven. I probably had 'til I was 18 – unless war took me away. Put in terms of my life up to then, I still had about one third of that time left to work things out. Everybody said I was good at workin' things out.

There was one thing I'd been thinkin' about – a lot – those past weeks since . . . Daddy said it was an okay topic, so I asked.

"What do you think Frankie would have been when he grew up?"

"You mean besides a wonderful human being?"

His question sort of took the wind out of my sales. Of course, that had to be the first consideration, but I'd never thought about grown-up life like that. He went on.

"Mother and I were talking about that very thing a few nights ago. She thought he'd have been a writer – he loved books and had such a fine way with words. My guess was a teacher."

"What about me? What do you think I'll be?"

"That may not be a fair question, Mike. You have to be what comes to fit you just right. I wouldn't want to influence you away from your destiny. I can tell you one thing, there will never be a finer man than you will be."

An unexpected tear trickled down my cheek. I let it be. I even nodded, not in a conceited way but just recognizin' that

daddy understood my main goal in life. He was a wise man. I was so lucky to have him for my daddy. As I'd think back on that conversation, later, I began to understand a great truth: A large part of why I would become a fine man was because of how I'd learned to be a fine man from my daddy. I really was lucky to have him. Someday, I'd tell him that – someday when I was older, and it would mean more to him.

A few miles south east of Bentonville, we came upon a car sittin' off on the opposite side of the road. Daddy crossed lanes and pulled in right ahead of it – head light to headlight you could say. He may have been anticipatin' a jump start. We got out. Daddy walked up to the young couple sittin' on the slope between it and the fence. I moved right along beside him.

"Got a problem?" he asked.

"Got two, since you asked."

The man – a boy – no more than 18 I figured, got to his feet and pointed to his front right tire. It was flat. The girl, about the same age and pregnant if I'd ever seen pregnant, remained on the ground – they'd found shade by a stand of bushes.

"I see. *Two*, you said.

"It's runnin' on fumes. Comin' down from Springfield, Missouri. I was hopin' to make it to Rogers before fillin' up. Got an uncle at the Texaco Station there. Figured he'd give me a deal."

"I think we may be able to take care of those things for you. This is my son, Fr . . Mike. You need water to drink, ma'am?"

"That would sure be nice, Sir."

I understood where daddy was goin', so I fetched the water jug and saw to her needs, while daddy and the boy jacked up the car and removed the wheel, then the tire from the wheel. Daddy laid the innertube on the pavement and had the boy stand on it. He knelt with his ear to the tire. He moved around it, then stopped.

"Here we go. The leak. Saw it there before I heard it. Looks like simple nail damage. Won't be hard to fix."

Daddy always carried his toolbox. He roughened the area around the hole with a rasp, then wiped on the special bondin' glue with the brush built into to the lid of the glue can. He cut a patch from an old inner tube he carried in the back of the truck just for such purposes. My daddy was always prepared.

While he let the patch dry, he took our reserve gas can and drained it into the boy's car. The boy mostly just stood there with his hands in his hip pocket. I figured he knew way too little to be startin' off cross country with a pregnant girl – his wife, I figured.

It took a number of minutes for the patch to dry. Daddy engaged them in conversation. I just listened. They had married at seventeen. They figured if he was married and had a child on the way, the draft would pass him up. It hadn't, and he was on his way to Ft. Smith to the Induction Center. Her parents lived there, and she was going to live with them until he returned. Pretty irresponsible all the way around I figured, but then, their stuff was their stuff. I had no way of knowin' the full story.

After inflatin' the innertube with the hand pump, we got the wheel back in place and we waited while they pulled out onto the road and started on their way. She waved at us out the window. Daddy wouldn't take either the boy's money for the gas and repair or his gasoline stamps. It meant he'd just given away three gallons of rationin' stamps – not a small deal in 1943 – especially on a day we had to work in an out of town trip.

When we got to Bentonville, daddy drove right to the tire store. We soon had six tires rowed up behind us. We had passed a little roadside park at the edge of town and returned there to have our lunch – cold fried chicken – one of my all-time favorites. Daddy parked the truck so we could sit in the cool of its shadow.

"Have you noticed the street names, daddy?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"They aren't pretty names – 'B' Street, NW, 'F' Street SE."

"Maybe not pretty but efficient I imagine. Think about it. If you needed an address on 'D' Street, NE, how would you get there from here?"

It only took me a moment to understand and I laid it out – here to there with perfect confidence that I would be correct.

I had thoughts on the subject, of course.

"I see. Like you said, efficient. If a stranger needed to find Florence Street in Lords, they'd have no idea how to get there. I still like Florence and Pine and Magnolia better, even if the directin' does take longer. *Magnolia*. Isn't that just a wonderful name for a street. It paints such a wonderful picture of the tall old trees spreadin' out across the road, each one offerin' up summer cool and beautiful big flowers."

The fact it had been the street on which I had lived my entire life had nothin' to do with my assessment, of course.

"Maybe *you'll* become the writer in our family. Your use of words is special, too."

It hadn't been a demand or even a suggestion – just a possibility.

"We exchanged both smiles and the little bowl of potato salad. I cleaned it out with my finger – not something allowed at home. I had no reservations about doing it since it was just me and daddy."

Ten minutes later we were on the road again. A half hour later, daddy pointed to the right, thirty yards ahead. 'Tim and Mary's Produce'. I got excited.

Daddy pulled up in the grass next to it. There were apples and plumbs and berries and peaches and grapes – but no pears.

"I was hopin' for a pear," I said, just sayin' what was on my mind.

The woman smiled. She reached under the counter and was soon back with the biggest, prettiest pear I'd ever seen. It was dark yellow with brown speckles and rose cheeks and just drippin' in juice I knew. She explained.

"The skin of this variety of pears is delicate. Once it's picked, this heat soon takes its toll on it. We keep them in the root cellar and out here, on ice."

“I looked at daddy. I had no idea how much a big, beautiful, well cared for, already cooled down, juicy lookin’, multi-colored Pear might cost.

“Can you make that two?” he said.

She could. I thought a nickel each was expensive, but daddy didn’t flinch. It may not have seemed like much to anybody else, but it would be one of my most treasured memories of all time – daddy gettin’ me a treat and not even askin’ about the price that hot summer day on our first real road trip together. I enjoyed that pear more than any I would ever have. I loved my daddy more than I could remember havin’ loved him before. It had nothin’ to do with gettin’ the pear. It was everythin’ about him just bein’ my daddy.

Back at the station, Russ and I helped unload the tires. I ran the town lettin’ the men know who had placed orders that the tires had come in.

Finally, it was three o’clock, and just me and mamma in the café. She directed me to wash the black rubber dust off my hands and arms while she cut a fresh-out-of-the-oven peach pie and set two slices on plates on the counter. We each took a stool and I proceeded to give her a blow by blow description of the best day in my life, up to then.

I mentioned Frankie several times and took special note to see how she reacted. She seemed fine with it, even offered smiles. Of course, I had no idea what was goin’ on in her heart. Smiles could be faked; the feelin’s in our hearts, couldn’t.

CHAPTER TEN:
Tradin' Faces

More changes came to Lords and into my life the latter half of August.

"I got somethin' big to tell you, Mikey," Willie announced once we arrived at the creek to fish that morning.

It had rained for two days, so I had permission from daddy to build a fire to fry the fish we caught that morning – so long as I kept it small, inside a circle of rocks, and down on the bank, which was mostly hard packed, red mud and sand. I understood the precautions. We were settin' up the fire circle, so we could get the fire started in order to make sure the flat stones in the center would be plenty hot when we slapped the day's catch on them to cook. I had learned all about how to do that from Frankie. He'd been a good teacher. Not the tellin' or showin' kind, but the let's see you give it a try, kind. I liked those the best.

"So, what's your big thing?" I asked.

We were on our knees, sittin' back on our legs loadin' kindling into the circle.

He broke out in tears. I didn't understand, of course, but I stopped doin' what I was doin' and looked him in his eyes, lettin' him know he was the most important thing just then.

"Dad says we're movin' away from Lords."

"When, where, why?"

"Packin' up today and tomorrow and leavin' out the next day. Goin' to Tulsa. Dad got a job in the oil fields. Says it's really good money and I guess we been hurtin' pretty bad lately."

I had never lost a friend by movin' before. I didn't know how to react. I did my best, since it was clearly a big deal to Willie.

"You're a good kid, Willie. You'll have lots of new friends in no time."

"No, I won't. I'm a dumby. You're the only one who's ever put up with me. I know I'm no good at learnin' stuff, but you never cared. Tilly comes right out and calls me a halfwit. Jerry says I'm dumber than a moron. It's been easier takin' that stuff from them then it will be havin' to lose you."

At that point I *really* didn't know what to say.

"Your parents and your sister treat you good."

"Only 'cause they have to. It's like a law or somethin' that you have to love your family members."

"I don't know what to say, Willie. I will sure miss you. You've always been a good friend. I've always really liked you. You just have to believe you'll find another friend. Tulsa's a huge city and that means there's lots more kids there to pick from. My advice to you is to just keep tryin' until you find one."

Willie was the sort who needed a specific plan. I knew I needed to present one to him.

"Here's a idea that just popped into my head. When you get to school, look around the playground and find a boy your age who's always sittin' by himself. You go right up to him and offer him your hand and introduce yourself and say you want to be his friend. I bet that will work."

"You always have good ideas, Mikey. Thanks. I'm goin' to do that."

It turned out to be a slow fish day, but we each had one worth cookin' up. Filleted, it always looked like more than it was. It was mostly about getting' to have the fire, anyway. I suppose we could have cooked two dozen fish that mornin' as much firewood as we burned.

Willie had one more thing on his mind.

"I want you to keep Ol' Blue, Mikey. He's mostly your dog anyway. Bein' a country dog I think he'd be unhappy in Tulsa. I know you'll take good care of him."

"I think you've made a good decision about Blue. I will – I'll take real good care of him and we'll talk about you to keep you in his memory."

By then, Willie was able to smile. We took our time eatin' the fish, recognizin' it was the last time we'd be doin' that.

We doused the fire and policed the area. We walked back to town. His place was first. I had no idea how to say good-bye forever to a best friend. I hit him on his shoulder. He hit me back. He went his way and I went mine.

I didn't ever cry over it, but it took some deep breathin' and long blowin' to prevent it right then. If I had learned anything up to that point that summer, it was that life changed. I knew I needed to accept it – embrace it, even – but I hated it with every fiber of my being. Someday, *I'd* probably be leavin' Lords and all its people behind, and then I'd be the guy forcin' the changes on everybody else. I hoped I remembered to take time to think about their feelings, in my own eagerness to move on with my life.

As I approached the fillin' station, I saw somethin' I had never seen in all of my eleven years and four months of life. There was a black man at the pump. Daddy was addin' gas to his old pick-up. Then, far more fascinatin' than *that* most fascinatin' thing ever, a boy's head and shoulders appeared there inside the passenger side window. It was an amazin' experience. My inclination was to wade right in and introduce myself.

I waded right in and introduced myself.

"Hi. I'm Mike. This is my daddy's fillin' station. You passin' through?"

Although I hadn't recognized it right off, the boy looked terrified. His dad walked around the front of the truck to where I was standin' at the door.

"This here's my son, Isaac. Just turned twelve. We just moved into the house next to the old German man – Horst, I

think he calls himself. Goin' to help Abraham Grubbs run his place. He says people around here calls him Old Abe. Says he's done got way too old to tend to his horses – got over two dozen. I spent most a my life over in Tennessee workin' racers. Isaac here's real good with horses – especially the youngin's. Hope you'll stop over and visit. It's my boy's first move so he's feelin' the woes about it. Ya understand."

The last phrase wasn't offered as a question like you'd expect. It was a flat-out statement. I figured I *did* understand – loosin' something you were deeply attached to. Unlike most of the boys in Lords, I knew I didn't have to ask daddy's permission to be with him. Black folks were looked down on in my county – treated badly by some. I figure Isaac's daddy was either really stupid or really brave for comin' there. Either way, I guess I admired him.

I spoke to his daddy but was really directin' my words to the boy.

"Can he stay awhile, now? I'd be happy to show him around town. Probably talk mamma out of a slice of pie – she runs the café."

I could see the boy's face light up. His daddy looked at my daddy. I couldn't tell for sure what the look meant. Grownups had those kinds of looks sometimes.

"They'll be fine," daddy said. "Lots of folks here are short on acceptance, but they're all basically really good folks – tolerant folks. Give us a while. Most will come around."

The man smiled and offered daddy a hand to shake. I wondered if that was the first-time daddy had ever touched a black person.

The man – Jackson, we'd learn – looked at his watch.

"It's two, now, son. Need you back at the farm by three thirty, you hear?"

"Yes, papa."

I helped open the door, and he got out. The next few moments were awkward. I didn't know if it was the color thing or just the new kid thing. Daddy helped.

"You can each have a orange pop from the cooler inside. It's gettin' to be a scorcher."

That seemed to be all it took. I had a purpose – leadin' him inside. Things just followed along after that. We sat in the back room 'til the pops were finished, then I took him over to meet Aunt Connie. With her connections she had the power to make or break things there in Lords. I was pleased with her reaction.

"This my new friend, Isaac. They're livin' over at Old Abe's place close to Horst's – top-notch horsemen I've heard. His daddy's name is Jackson."

I turned to him.

"You got a mamma? I forgot to ask."

"Of course. All kids gots a mamma. Mildred. Most folks calls her Milly. She does sewin' for folks. She made this very shirt I'm wearin'."

Aunt Connie reached out and felt it – the hem, the buttonholes. The collar. She nodded.

"Excellent work. I got mendin' that needs doing. Come back later in the week and I'll have it gathered up. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

He offered a little bow with every ma'am.

My aunt gave him the quick course in Lords' etiquette.

"I'm *Connie*, Isaac, not ma'am. No ma'ams around here. *Sir's* okay if you really feel like usin' it."

He nodded. His straw hat had come off the second we entered and stayed there held close on his belly until we left. I thought it was pretty nice. If I'd a had a hat, I'd a tried it.

We left out the back door. I wanted to introduce him to Tilly. Really, I wanted to see her reaction. Tilly had opinions about everything. Nobody in Lords paid any attention to them, but she had 'em. She was on her front porch swingin'. Tilly spent a gosh awful amount of time on her front porch swingin'.

She saw us approachin' down the middle of the street. There were no sidewalks in Lords. We crossed her lawn and stopped at the base of her steps.

"Matilda, this is my new friend, Isaac. Isaac, this it Matilda, one of three eleven-year-old girls in town. No twelve-year-old's I'm afraid. Three boys, though."

“He removed his hat. Happy to meet you, Matilda. That’s a very pretty name.”

From the remark and the way he looked at her, I got the idea that at twelve, his young bein’ was far better lubricated with hormones than mine was at eleven.

“We have lemonade if you’d like some,” she offered.

She’d never offered me and Willie lemonade. I decided it was somethin’ to smile about rather than to get upset about.

“Had a pop at the garage. I’m just makin’ the rounds with Isaac and wanted him to meet you.

“Thank you, Franklin. How considerate of you.”

Whew – put on the hip boots!

We moved on around town givin’ him a good cross section of who we were. I was impressed by the positive reception they gave him – well, at least the lack of a negative reception. Most didn’t offer hands or invite us inside, but they proved what daddy had told his daddy – we were at least tolerant. I just pointed out my house as we passed, not sure if I should take him up to my room or not. Our place was a lot nicer than the house he was movin’ into. We needed somethin’ for later, anyway.

We ended up in our little park. It had two main features: A statue of a Confederate Soldier and two flagpoles surrounded by a bed of flowers. The poles only had flags on them on special occasions – U.S. and Arkansas. I couldn’t tell if he was impressed or not. He didn’t say. By then we were thirsty, so we got a drink from the standpipe close to the bleachers. For some reason I felt better about him knowin’ that he knew about standpipin’. I guess that was a third feature: the baseball diamond. It didn’t have a backstop, so the bleachers were a safe distance off to the north, behind first base. The configuration called for some special rules. We parked ourselves on the top bleacher.

“You play ball?” I asked.

“Some.”

“What grade you goin’ into?”

“Don’t rightly know. Not been in school regular like.”

“Can you read?”

“Some.”

“Write?”

“Some.”

“Know who the President is?”

That got a huge grin and enthusiastic nod as he answered.

“Abraham Lincoln.”

It was a start. I’d have to talk with the new head teacher at school – a Mr. Evans, I’d heard – *Max* Evans I thought.

“Your daddy says your good with horses.”

“I guess so. Daddy’s a honest man.”

That tickled me, but I didn’t let on.

“I hope I can visit the place. Haven’t been out to visit Old Abe in years. Not proud of that. Does he seem well?”

“He’s awful pale.”

At first, I couldn’t tell if he was bein’ serious or not. He slapped his knee and offered a wonderful laugh. I joined him. This was going to work.

“You got brothers or sisters?” I asked.

“Jacky. He’s in the Army. Drivin’ trucks from what he writes us. Daddy’s proud of him, servin’ our country like that. You? Brothers or sisters?”

It was the first time I had been faced with that question since Frankie died. I took a stab at it.”

“Had a brother. He died.”

My how I hoped that satisfied him. It seemed to, at least for the time bein’. He just nodded.

It got on toward time for him to leave, and I walked him halfway home. He seemed hesitant when I stopped and began the good-bye thing.

“Somethin’ wrong, I asked.”

“Just scary, bein’ alone in new territory I guess.”

I was ready to tell him I’d walk all the way with him when his daddy came ridin’ up over the ridge on a beautiful black horse.

"Thought you might be ready for a lift after all your walkin' 'round town, son."

He offered down an arm and Isaac swung up behind his daddy like they'd done it a hundred times. They probably had. Jackson winked at me and nodded. I returned it. They galloped off toward Old Abe's place.

Jackson and I had just had a moment. I wasn't sure what it had been, but it left me feelin' good.

Isaac was a very scared boy. I felt bad about that. Jackson understood – he was a good father. I was happy about that. Jackson seemed to trust my daddy and me. I was *very* happy about that.

It was clear that among even the good people of Lords, tolerance was as much as they'd be able to offer up front – acceptance and incorporation would not happen easily or soon. Maybe that was as good as it got anywhere. If that was true, it stunk – America stunk. On the other hand, daddy and Aunt Connie were respected there in Lords, so maybe together we could pull it off. For just a moment it seemed like one more responsibility I hadn't asked for. On second thought, I felt really happy to be a part of it.

I headed for cemetery behind the church up the hill. I had been visitin' Frankie's grave every day – rain or shine. The flowers that had been laid on it had long since wilted. I had removed them. Pastor Pruitt had set up a donation box at the funeral – for a headstone. Hardly anybody could afford a headstone on their own in those days. It wasn't big, but it contained all the necessary information: His name and the date he was born and the date he died. I insisted on how the name should be: Franklin 'Frankie' Rakes. Nobody ever called him Franklin. He hadn't been named after anybody special. Just a name daddy and mamma liked. Same for me, they said. That's how it should be, I figured – a name just about the person, just his, no suggestion he had to live up to anybody but himself. The man who did the carvin' on the stones asked if we wanted, PFC. – for private first class – before his name. I threw a minor fit against it. Daddy and mamma were easily swayed toward my view. Frankie would have hated havin' to go through eternity with a reminder of the war sittin' right there

above his head.

Weeds had started growin' in the bare soil. I kept them plucked back. Come the September rains I would plant grass. By then the dirt would have settled firm so the remainder of the mound could be leveled off.

I never talked to him because I figured there wasn't any *him* to talk to anymore. I usually recalled some time we'd had together – some time that brought a smile. I knew he would have liked that. I understood that at some point I'd stop the daily visits. I figured that would just naturally take care of itself.

From there, I ran and stumbled and rolled my way down the hill. I checked in with daddy to tell him Isaac had met up with his daddy. He could tell the experience had affected me, but I chose not to pursue it. I realized I had failed to introduce him to mamma. There would be another day. Hope he didn't think I had been lyin' about the pie.

All and all, a day that, early on, had shown good promise for a fine day, had become an up and down one for me. Willie and I had fished and had the fire, but I learned he was leavin'. I made a new friend but discovered he had to be frightened just because of who he was and where he was. If there was a highlight, I suppose it was Tilly's attempt to treat me cordially. It was likely just her showin' off for the new kid. I figured I should just be pleased regardless. I must say, I was pleasantly surprised at how she handled the whole thing.

I had trouble gettin' to sleep that night. I had heard there had been Klan activity not far to the south and I feared for Isaac and his family – for Horst, as well, I supposed.

Mornin' came. I stretched myself into one more day in Lords.

It was early and had breakfast at six with daddy at the café.

"I was worried about Isaac's family last night, daddy. Heard rumors about the Klan."

"You'll hear it, so I need to tell you. The Klan did come last night."

My stomach dropped, and my head started thumpin'. Before I could ask, daddy continued.

"The men here in Lords figured they'd come, so we gathered at Old Abe's and when they pulled up in three pickups with their masks, tall hats and oil-soaked cross already to burn, we confronted them, rifles at the ready. It was a terrible thing to have to do here in America. Anyway, we stood them up in front of their cross, unmasked them – well, unmasked them right down to their skivvies, took pictures, and five papers have agreed to print them. We have to keep rememberin' there are lots more good people in Carver County than there are dastardly ones."

Although I thought it, I didn't say it: it only takes one 'dastardly' to throw a hundred good lives into ruin.

"Will they be back?" I asked.

"I doubt it. They have been unmasked, identified and humiliated from one end of the county to the other. They are a bunch of cowards – terrified of not roaming in groups. I doubt if they'll be back. Just in case, we'll have a few men hangin' around over there for a while, nights."

"I can't imagine how scared Isaac must have been. I can tell. He's a really scared kid. I have no idea how to help him."

"You've already started. We have no idea about the life he's had to live. We just need to keep to the good relationship – like we do with everybody else."

I heard his words. But clearly Isaac and his family *weren't* 'everybody else.' It seemed naïve to think that people who needed to hate and hurt other people would just give up on such easy targets.

"Russ going to spell you this noon?"

"That's the plan. He seems to be getting . . . what's the word . . . stronger, maybe, every day. He has his first appointment with the new doctor this morning. It will be interesting to see how he reacts to that – *well*, I hope."

"Me too. I'll hang here then – try to get my fill of grease, dirty plates and wrinkled fingertips."

"Hard to get enough of those things, I suppose."

We shared a grin. He made ready to leave, suckin' down the last of his coffee as he stood. He walked to where

mamma was behind the counter, leaned over and kissed her. The café was empty. He probably wouldn't have done it if there had been customers. I didn't get it. Why didn't people want to share in other people's love for each other? I always watched, and I always thought it was wonderful.

I got to work on the early mornin' dishes – only eight sets, but it would leave the next session with that many fewer. Mamma went into the lady's room. She was in there quite a while. I went to the door to listen, preparin' to knock and see if she was alright. I heard her cryin' – weepin' I guess is what grown women do.

I never knew what to do when there was a female cryin'. I went ahead and knocked lightly.

"You okay in there, mamma?"

"I'm fine. Just a little early morning wheezing. I'll be right out."

I'd heard her weepin' before back at the house. Way too often. I never made on I knew or confronted her over it. I went back to wipin' down the tables and straightenin' the salt and pepper and such. She returned forcin' a smile. I figured she'd get to work on the cobbler for lunch – blackberry the way it looked from what she had settin' out. I loved that. Maybe she'd whip sweet cream and put a dollop on top of every serving.

Oddly, I thought, she came over to where I was workin' on the family booth back in the corner. She reached out and drew me close. We were soon facin' each other with arms around each other's waists.

"I cry sometimes, Mikey. Daddy cries sometimes. I'm sure you cry sometimes. It takes a long time before that stops. It's alright, you know."

I leaned forward and lay my head against her shoulder.

I nodded. She knew I had nodded.

"I cry at night. I've decided it's mostly for me and not Frankie anymore. I cry because I miss him. I cry because he isn't in that other bed durin' lightnin' and thunderstorms. I cry, wonderin' what I could have done different that might have kept him from doin' it. Often, recently, I just cry, not sensin'

any special reason for it. Aunt Connie says cryin' things out makes you feel better. It just wears me out, so I give up and go to sleep."

"You seem to have it figured out. You are wise beyond your years. You know, daddy and I are always here for you when you want to talk."

"I know. I'm here for you, too, you know."

"I know. Look at me."

I had never thought of it that way. I suddenly felt somewhat better. What I think she'd just said was that I was helpin' her, sometimes – that it was a two-way street. I suddenly felt six inches taller – and older. More like Frankie, maybe.

I started singin' – *I'm Gonna Buy a Paper Doll I Can Call My Own*. I urged her into dancin'. I moved her all over that café floor. I didn't pretend to either be able to sing or dance, but that didn't matter. We went at it like the hoedowns in western movies. She hummed along – not knowin' the words, I guess.

In the end, we were smilin' and laughin' and the tears rollin' down our cheeks were those of happiness. What a wonderful realization that was. It is five minutes from my life I will never forget. I have the feelin' she won't either. I hoped the Mills Brothers would forgive me for the liberties I took with both lyrics and tune.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:
The Devil's Haven

It was mid-morning. I was at the station handlin' the pumpin'. Daddy had been busy tunin' an engine and had just come out – wipin' his hands. Between daddy and mamma, I think my family held the hand wipin' record for all of Custer County.

A car pulled up to the pump. A man – alone – in his early thirties I figured. Hadn't ever seen him before. Car wore a Kentucky plate.

"What can I do for you, Sir? Fill up, oil check, radiator?"

"Five gallons, regular, please."

He seemed to be a pleasant man.

I pumped five gallons up into the gas pump and set the nozzle for a slow steady flow, then got after his windshield. I'd determined August was the worst month for bugs. Maybe they were followin' the highways back from their summer vacation. Willie would have gone into convulsions over that. Frankie would have laughed and said, "Good one, Squirt."

"You passin' through, Sir?"

"No. I've just moved into Davis. I am the new head teacher at the school – seventh and eighth grades."

What he said struck me as funny; what else would you teach beside the head – the navel, perhaps – cuticles? I controlled my delight with myself.

"Mr. Evans, then, I presume."

"That's right. And you are . . .?

"Mike Rakes. This is my daddy's station. That's my mamma's café. Good to meet you. We'll be seein' lots of each other the next nine months."

I called to daddy to come and meet him. The man got out and offered his hand. I had wondered why a man his age had not been drafted. I understood immediately. He wore a built-up shoe on his left foot. I'd seen it on others who had suffered from polio. I felt sad. Dad responded to the man's offer.

"You are a brave man to offer your hand to a mechanic. I better pass this time. Glad you stopped by. I've had something on my mind related to school. A new family with a boy about eighth grade age just moved in. I've been wondering if they need to bring him over before openin' day or just show up."

"Either will work. I'll be working there mornings beginning next week."

I had to open my mouth on the matter, of course.

"He'll be the first black boy in our school."

"Black?"

"Yes, Sir. Just moved here from Tennessee. I think he's pretty far behind in his education. We need to work somethin' out for him. I offer to help him – tutor and such. I know other kids will, too. Matilda for one."

"He can't come to *Hill School*. He's *black* you say."

Daddy spoke.

"I don't understand how the color of his skin has anything to do with school attendance."

Daddy did know, of course. All the schools in Arkansas were segregated.

"It just isn't done. Surely you don't want a black boy sittin' beside *your* son in school."

"They've been together around here. Good friends from all I can see. Far as I can tell his black hasn't rubbed off any on my boy, and my boy's white hasn't rubbed off on him. Nice kid. Good father. Haven't had the pleasure of meetin' his

mother but will on Saturday. My wife has invited them over for dinner."

I had to wonder if she really had or if daddy was just layin' it on the man. I struggled to contain my snickers. Any way it got sliced, I figured I might be in for a difficult year in Max Evan's classroom – perhaps *he* would as well. I felt better immediately. Daddy continued, and it just got better and better.

"Friday night's the school board meeting, isn't it? I suppose you should expect an overflow crowd from Lords if you insist on runnin' the school in such an unchristian manner."

Daddy looked down at me.

"Isn't there a opening on the school board, son?"

"Yes, Sir. Mr. Allen resigned back in May."

"Perhaps I need to see about running. Have you heard if anybody else has filed to run?"

"Nobody has. My good friend, Judge Carter, was speakin' of it over cherry pie earlier this week. Says he's ready to just appoint somebody."

Without more words, the man handed me fifty cents and tore off five gallons worth of ration stamps. I removed the hose, screwed the cap in place, and thanked him. He got back in his car and left. I hoped his clean windshield would help him see things more clearly. If I ever became a writer, I'd have to remember to use that line.

"Time for a pop, I think," daddy said, and we stepped inside out of the sun – not necessarily the heat, mind you.

He hitched his head and, pop in hand, we went into the back room and sat on the sofa. The encounter had raised an interestin' question for me.

"I know that Arkansas is mostly white people and I know the white people in Arkansas don't generally like black people. How did Lords become so tolerant?"

"Don't you know the story of *Biggs versus Putman*?"

"No, Sir."

"What a shame we've stopped tellin' it."

I leaned back ready to listen. Everybody said daddy was a great storyteller.

"Just prior to and during the Civil War, there was a man who called himself Colonial George Putman. He dressed in black, rode a black horse and carried a black Bible – the color not the content."

I smiled.

"He had a small, but intensely loyal following that rode with him – as many as two dozen at the height of his popularity – mostly ignorant slackers. He believed his God-ordained mission was to fight the abolitionist movement here in this state – being against those wanting to free the black and Indian slaves. He traveled the state, particularly up here, finding towns he called 'Devil's Havens' – small towns that he believed were in some way affiliated with the underground railroad – helping move black people up north where they could be free. His approach was simple: kidnap the mayor, hang him, deliver his body back to the town square and leave his calling card – three red feathers tied together. Nobody ever understood its significance. The man was thought not to be of sound mind.

"There was another man named Rosco Biggs. Rosco didn't have riders with him. He traveled alone. He traveled mostly at night. He'd stay close enough to Putman, so he could keep abreast of his plans and he'd ride ahead and warn the towns about to be set upon. They'd hide and protect their city officials and meet the riders from behind barricades they set up on their Main Street. Eventually, Putman was killed, and his followers scattered like the useless collection of cowards they were. Well, Lords was one of those towns old Rosco warned and saved. Interestingly, Lords had no connection to the abolitionists, but after what Putman did – savin' our mayor – a group of the citizens got together and rethought our position and moved on to build one of the most active and successful 'rail heads' for the underground railroad in all the south. Old Rosco Biggs was a black man.

"It really ought to be *his* statue in our park, son. The story has been passed on to every generation since – except I now hear, yours. We need to do somethin' about that."

"I propose that you and mamma and I write down his story and find a way to make sure every generation reads it. Maybe in 7th grade history."

"I'm in. Think we can twist mamma's arm to join us?"

"Even if we couldn't, you know she'd be right there lookin' over our shoulders, correctin' our spellin' and grammar."

It was a wonderful smile we shared over it. I supposed for him, at least partly, it was celebratin' the woman he loved and was spendin' his life with. For me, it was acknowledgin' what an important influence she was havin' on me – whether I asked for it or not!

Russ arrived to handle out front. Me and him talked for just a few minutes. He was encouraged about himself after his first meetin' with his new doctor. It was like he really had hope beyond bedtime. It was about the greatest thing I could think of. Dad went back to his tunin' and I went back to the greasy water and lye soap. It was a true wonder of the universe that my hands still had skin clingin' to 'em.

Mom thought the Biggs story was a great idea. She said old Abe knew the story better than anybody. His daddy had been a friend of Rosco. I'd promised to check that out. It helped me understand how Abe had come to hire Jackson. That had been a puzzle. I got busy workin' on wrinklin' my finger prints pink, and mom tended to the front.

That evening, I had a puzzlement I shared with daddy.

"Here's my question. Most of the people here are not truly supportive of black people – better than most places maybe – but they'd be happy to live without them. How come *you* escaped that?"

"Two things, I imagine. Growing up I had no reason to have contact with black people, so I had no reason to build a personal impression either way – pro or con. Like you, I had a very independent nature and wasn't inclined to be swayed by anything but personal experience when that was possible. The second is that that master mechanic I spoke of – the one who trained me for free – was a black man. He got word of my skills – from my dad I learned later on – and came down here

all the way from Fayetteville to look me over – watch me work. He had the practice of taking one boy under his wing every year. He invited me to be that boy the year I turned eighteen."

"The baked potato and sauerkraut year?"

"That's right. He provided me with a tiny room with a bed and lunch every day. He paid no salary, but he saw that I had time for a part time job for money to handle other things. He worked me hard and taught me well. He was one of the finest men I've ever known – skilled, honest, farsighted."

"That's a great story. Thanks."

I drifted off that night feelin' somehow special about my daddy.

I woke up the next mornin' missin' Willie. Willie was like underwear: a guy never really appreciates it until you open the drawer one mornin' and there isn't any in there. Truthfully, I was concerned about him. Not only was he havin' to worry about his brother Dave fightin' in the war, he had to adjust to the biggest town by probably 1,000 times that he'd ever known, prepare for a new school that didn't yet understand about him, and find a new friend. I understood that just *one* friend would solve things. I hoped my advice about that was going to be helpful.

Before school let out that past spring, I had spent time going through the 7th graders books that I would be usin' the comin' year. The first thing I noticed was that most of them had been published in the late 1920s – I hoped the library in that room was more up to date. The math book and the English book contained nothin' I hadn't studied in the lower grades – an insult to my intelligence I figured. It would be the first year that Science was a regular subject and I looked forward to that – it had the latest publication date, 1941. I was *really* lookin' forward to American History. It had been one of Frankie's favorite classes in high school. I used to read in his books. He kidded me that I'd know it all by the time I got there, and they'd soon have me teachin' the class. Maybe he was right, but I figure there are lots of books I can read along that will expand on what the book has to say. The first month of history will be what's called *Civics* – what our constitution says and how our government runs. That should be about the most

important class in all of school, I'd think. It's what our boys are fightin' to protect. It's what Tommy Roland – Bart and Jane's son – died protectin'. I'm thinkin' our Frankie did more than his share protectin' it, also. I suppose he'll never get credit for it – well, maybe all those medals have already given him credit. Clearly, Frankie didn't want any credit.

I hoped the war got over with in a hurry and the men who started it were kept in prison for the rest of their lives – Hitler, Mussolini, and that Tojo Japanese guy. I didn't like the idea of killin' anybody, even for their terrible crimes. It can't be punishment to kill somebody. To be punished you have to experience bein' punished, and if your dead, you sure can't know that. Grownups are often bafflin'. I've determined that the more power people have the more bafflin' they are. Maybe I'll see that differently when I grow up.

Back when I was too young to understand, Frankie said somethin' like, 'when we're young we don't know enough to understand why grownups make the decisions they make. We just have to trust them.' It makes sense in things like makin' a three-year-old hold a grownups hand when crossin' the street and findin' better ways of solvin' problems than fightin' it out. Some of it will probably never make sense, like havin' to move the spoon away from you while eatin' soup to be an acceptable human being or staying in a line as your class moves through the school building. I wonder who thought they were so much smarter than the rest of us, so they could make those inane rules?

I like that word – *inane*. When Frankie was about fourteen it was one of his favorites. He really overdid it. I told him at the time I thought it was *inane* to use it because none of his friends knew what it meant. It made him laugh. I think it made him reconsider its use, too.

Early in the summer, Willie had asked me, if I could have just one thing in all the World, what would it be? I asked him to go first. His considered answer was, 'the biggest piece of chocolate cake ever cut.' He failed to understand that havin' the cake from which it had been cut would be even better, but what he said was pretty much a 'Willie answer'. I tried to put mine in Willy terms – 'to catch the biggest fish that ever swam

in Osage Creek'. He clearly approved.

What would it really be? World peace, probably, but there were so many other candidates: to alleviate pain and suffererin' and hunger and mistreatment and inequality – prejudice for sure. Willie wouldn't understand how those were 'things'. Maybe they weren't. It was undoubtedly selfish, but what I'd really ask for if I was given that chance would be to have Frankie back *lovin' his life*. I know, that's my stuff, not his, but then selfishness is always centered on 'my stuff' instead of 'your stuff' isn't it?

Frankie probably knew me better than anybody. Once he said that the biggest problem, I was going to have to deal with was thinkin' I had to solve problems that had no solution. Thinkin' back, he was probably just reflectin' his own inner struggle. I was too young to understand. I probably still am, but I recognize those wishes I put forth are exactly the kinds of things he was speakin' about – world peace, and such. I already had the solution, and it took Aunt Connie, of all people, to point it out to me. My approach to improvin' life was to go at it one little problem at a time – like Willie findin' a new friend, not setin' out to make all kids completely friendly. I figured it was really just sneakin' up on the main problem from the bottom up, gradually overwhelmin' it, so to speak. Frankie's approach was tryin' to solve it from the top down. Maybe I couldn't make the world a kind and friendly place, but I could be kind and friendly to Willie and Horst and Russ and Isaac, and certainly to my parents – little things on the way up toward the big one.

I probably needed to reassess my position with Tilly – Matilda. For certain I could see that I needed to come up with a workable strategy for Mr. Evans – some way of solvin' his problem without addin' to either his or mine.

Several days later:

It was going on noon. I was afraid I might have missed him – Judge Carter. He was the County Judge. I wasn't sure what a County Judge did, but it was like boss of the County I thought. I hurried to the café. The Judge was just leaving.

"Judge. You got a minute? Somethin' about the law I need to know."

"I always have a minute for my favorite question asker."

That made me feel really good, but I didn't take time to dawdle over it. I did smile and nod.

"We have a big school problem comin' up. A new black family just moved into Lords and the head teacher says their boy can't go to our school. Is that the law?"

"I'm afraid it is. Terrible, but it *is* the law."

"So, our county has the responsibility to educate white kids but not black kids?"

"Not black kids, not Indian kids, not Chinese kids. Not the weak-minded or the handicapped kids. You get the idea."

"I hear that in cities there are schools just for black kids – like down in Little Rock. How does that work?"

"Money *can* be allotted if it is determined there are enough black children needing to go to school."

"Who determines what *enough* means? *I'd* think *one* should be enough."

"A judge makes that decision and has the power to require it. There has to be a physical facility, books and willing teachers."

"Just hypothetically, if a judge, say here in this county, decided one black student was sufficient to invoke that law, how would the citizens go about making it happen?"

"Set up a three-man school board, submit a budget along with the other things I outlined and go to it."

"And how would that school board come into being?"

"In the beginning, the judge could appoint it from a list of willing citizens."

"And about how much money do you think that judge might offer to support such a project, assumin' the teachers were all volunteer and the books and supplies and place could be donated?"

"I'd say maybe eleven dollars and eleven cents per month for up to say four students."

"Very clever, Sir, one hundred dollars a year divided into nine monthly payments. Thank you for your time and information. If you ever want to be some kid's grampa, I'm

available."

He chuckled. I was serious. Sittin' across slabs of cherry pie from him for most of my days on earth, I had come to really like him.

"Am I to assume I will be hearing from you?"

"You're darned tootin' you will be hearin' from me. I assume it all has to be done officially by an adult."

"Let's just say an adult has to sign the legal documents – the petition to establish the service, first off."

"Thanks again. I'll have it all written out for you by tomorrow. You be here tomorrow?"

"You can count on it, Michel. I wouldn't miss this circus for all the bigots in the state?"

'In the state?' I figured that moved it up to the level of the most important sort of things.

By three o'clock, I had three adults agree to be on the school board – Daddy, Old Abe and Jackson. Jackson said he wasn't sure a black man could serve on a board, so I was holdin' Aunt Connie in reserve. I got Mr. Grover to consent to use a small, empty room upstairs over his general store. He even agreed to open the trapdoor in the floor to heat the area on cold days. Five women agreed to each handle one subject. An anonymous donor gave ten dollars for books and supplies – it was the Judge, but I promised never to tell. Shhh!

Ol' Blue was right at my side the whole time I walked the town arrangin' things. He seemed to sense the importance of what we were doin'. We both slept soundly that night.

Afternoons, *Hill School* would get out at three. We could be back in town by three fifteen. We had arranged Isaac's school day to be from one to five – that way some of us kids could visit his room for part of every day and make it more like a real school for him. *Hill School,* on top of Lords' Hill, took up on September fifteenth. The *Rosco Biggs School,* upstairs from Grover's General Store, took up that same day. Like Aunt Connie said, one little problem at a time.

EPILOGUE:

I have been your storyteller, Michael Rakes – Mikey all grown up – well, *he* would have thought all grown up. I'm not sure that ever really happens. Most of the words were his; I'm sure some of mine slipped in. The truths were unaffected.

In the end, like many of the other boys of the 1940s, I didn't stick around my tiny hometown. I only returned once after my parents passed – to see to the erection and dedication of a second statue in the park – the one I had commissioned to commemorate the contributions of Rosco Biggs on the occasion of the first annual Rosco J. Biggs Day across Carver County. It hadn't been well attended, but it *had* been. The park had matured into the simply beautiful centerpiece of the community under grounds keeper Isaac Jackson. It had also been given a name: The Franklin Rakes/Thomas Roland City Park. The mayor made a speech – The Honorable Russell Madison. The long-time Chairman of the City Council made a longer speech – Chairperson Matilda Smith (proving, perhaps she *could* be the boss of *her* world.)

Daddy had been right-on in that talk we had when I was eleven. He said only marry her if you find you absolutely can't keep from it. I found my special lady and she has become the light and inspiration of my life. We've traveled the world, lived in cities and wide spots in the road, in rich countries and poor countries, but it is Lords that remains my standard of strength and right and compassion and love. Whatever I have become or will become is tied at its roots to Lords, Arkansas, Pop. 104.

When I think about daddy and mamma, O'l Mel, Willie, Jane and Bart, parades on the 4th, the kind hearted – if cowardly – Pastor Pruitt, Russ, big brother Frankie, Isaac, and dear, dear Ol' Blue, that formative cradle of my youth returns in vibrant detail – every face, every smile, every fear, every tear, every defeat and every victory. Since then, I have been shaped by places and people and events too numerous to count but most important of all remains, *That Summer at Lords*.

Yours truly,
Michael K Rakes, MD
Traveling Physician,
Doctors to the Needy, Worldwide
'Addressing one affliction at a time.'

* * *

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