

STOLEN LIVES: An American Crisis

"They're at school. Of course, they're safe."

A novel for thoughtful adults and teens

By

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FORWARD

Young people are supposed to grow into young adults; young adults into adults; adults into seniors. That is clearly nature's plan. Fortunately, that is how it works for most people. Not so, sometimes.

Here, the reader will trace the day-to-day-doings of five precious teenagers – strangers – each taking his or her best stab at learning the life lessons all teens need to learn, making the plans that all teens come to make, and becoming imbued with hope, determination and optimism about their futures – eager to rush into life beyond high school, confident in his or her ability to surmount all obstacles.

In the end, these five, separate, lives will converge at school – if only for a few, final, terror-filled moments. (No violence is depicted.)

The author believes the reader will come to love these young people, gain insights into how they became who they were, and recognize the irrefutable responsibilities we each have to positively affect those lives we have an opportunity to touch.

-TDG
(psychologist, educator,
author, parent)

The places, characters and events depicted in this story
are fictitious.

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CHAPTER ONE:
Meet the young people
(Amy, Justin, Lamar, Maria, James)

AMY:

Ten-year-old Tommy called into his big sister, Amy, who was at her mirror making one final attempt at fashioning the perfect hair for her day at school.

“What’s the date, Sis?”

“February 14th. Pretty late to get the woman in your life a valentine.”

“Yuck – to the editorial, not the 14th – thanks for that. Needed it for the final touch on my story for English.”

“You wrote a love story.”

“*Yuck*. Didn’t you hear me the first time? It’s about a dinosaur that devours the principal’s house.”

“You don’t like Mr. Coffelt?”

“Oh, yeah, I like him just fine.”

“Do you always fantasize about doing away with the people you like, *just fine*?”

“You always make life more complicated than it is. In my story his name is ‘Mr. Smith’.”

The conversation ended with no conclusions – the way it often did during such friendly banter between the two of them. Recently turned 18-year old’s, and 10-year old’s rarely have many obvious things in common.

Amy picked up her jacket and backpack and headed for the stairs, trying to decide between having her mother’s

famous French toast that smelled soooo good, or skipping it in her quest to elude the addition of a few extra ounces so she could more comfortably slip into her dress for the upcoming, Valentine Ball. Since all family members were required to sit at the breakfast table whether they ate or not, she'd risk the result.

"Love you *Little Demon Boy*, she called back over her shoulder to Tommy."

"I know that. Why do you keep saying it?"

"To remind myself how I feel, in case your insufferable behavior leads me to second guess my feelings for you."

"Thanks, then. Love you, too, *Wicked Witch of the North*, or is that *East*? Whatever."

It was Tommy's week to get his brother, Marc, into his wheelchair and down the stairs on the chair lift. He was sitting up on the edge of his bed when Tommy entered his room.

"How's my barely teenage brother this morning?" he asked with a smile as he dropped to his knees and slipped feet into socks and socks into loafers.

"Doing well. I'm going to need to get tennies – I've decided to sign up for cross country today."

Startled for only a second, Tommy offered up the appropriate chuckle.

"Figured as much the way you've been putting away the Wheaties lately."

Marc had suffered lower spinal cord damage at birth and though he supposed nobody in that condition ever really accepted it, he was determined not to let it be a demon in his life – having Tommy in it offered up enough of that! They approached the top of the stairs.

"You ever consider just letting me roll down the stairs, bumpity, bumpity, bump, little brother?"

"Every single time we arrive here."

"Why don't you?"

"Because I love you, you dunderhead. What's the deal with everybody's problem about that this morning?"

Marc let it go, content to know he'd pressed a button – after all, what were older brothers for?

Breakfast was the one time the entire family was

together each day, so it was treasured (not saying there weren't occasional bellyaches). Conversation always flowed easily. Their father would signal the time had come to an end by saying, "Go! Make yourselves helpful, today." Hearing those words once, might not have made a huge impression, but every day of a person's young life made it an entirely different matter. They understood without reservation that it was the guide by which their parents lived.

Mr. and Mrs. Adams owned a hardware store and worked long hours. Still, one was always home when a child was there and very few times were they not represented at events in which any of their children participated.

Tommy saw Marc to the curb out front to wait for the school van that transported him to and from his day's education and peer-mingle time. All quite unnecessarily, he waited on the sidewalk to make sure his big brother was properly loaded, and then stood, waving him to the end of the block. Like the other family members, Tommy was troubled that Marc had to go through life unable to walk but, also, like the others, he was determined to help him achieve as 'normal' a life as possible. That meant offering assistance only when necessary, recognizing it would be a disservice to him not to expect and allow him to do for himself everything he was capable of doing.

Tommy believed that being the youngest in his family was a fortunate happenstance – he not only had a group of loving people who could and would offer him good advice when he needed it, but he could watch them all mess up and hopefully discover ways to avoid falling into the same difficulties. Some folks thought of him as 'sneaky'. He thought of himself as 'well-schooled' in the art of survival. As young imps went, Tommy was among the most beloved and enjoyable.

Oddly, some might think, he and Amy were actually very close – best friends of a sort. In private, they talked easily and shared concerns and solutions. Amy's budding wisdom helped Tommy understand some of the contradictions and complexities of life and relationships. Tommy's naivety, and therefore fully honest responses, helped Amy ferret out

the important from the less important aspects in her always overly intricate social life.

Tommy retrieved his backpack from where he had dropped it on the porch and darted through the waiting open back door of the family car – his daily ride to school and cherished private time with his captive parents.

“Gonna get a “A” on my dinosaur story, today. I put a disclaimer on the front page saying, ‘No actual principals were harmed during the writing of this story.’ Miss Wilson will die laughing at that, and she’ll show it to Mr. Coffelt. Speaking of Amy – he lowered his voice mimicking his father’s tone, ‘But, Tommy’, the lad’s father says, ‘we were *not* speaking of Amy’ – anyway, I think she’s got a boyfriend problem. I can straighten her out about most things, but I feel outta my league on this one. I suppose it will take a mom. Be subtle, though, I don’t want her thinking I’ve squealed on her – you understand. Me and her have a great relationship just like we are. Did I tell you Mary Lou Gatsby kissed me on my neck? She was aiming for my cheek, but I gave a little hop at just the right moment. Girls are contemptuous beings – I went to the thesaurus to find that word – *contemptuous*. I knew you’d be proud of me for doing that.”

The car stopped. Tommy opened the door and paused.

“Thanks for the good talk. Love you. Be good children today.”

He snickered himself out the door, closed it and transitioned from family life, to life with his waiting friends – no girls!

JUSTIN:

Justin was finishing his early morning hour of piano practice – slipped into his routine between showering and breakfast. It was his preference – not a requirement.

“Wheaties or Cheerios?” his mother called from the kitchen when she heard the music stop.

“Breakfast steak and eggs, with a heapin’ side a homemade biscuits and white, pepper gravy, ma’am.”

Having been offered no reasonable response, he entered the kitchen wearing his patented grin.

“Wheaties it will be then,” she said, greeting smile with smile. “Please, put the bread down in the toaster. Your menu sounds pretty good, however. How about having that for supper?”

“Sounds great! Will I need to kill and field dress a steer out on the back forty, ma’am?”

It had, of course, been rhetorical.

He managed a quick peck to his mother’s cheek as he passed her on the way to the counter.

“One or two for you, ma?”

“One, like usual. I’d think that after 17 years on this Earth you might have learned that.”

Justin offered a shrug and went about – what most boys would consider a mundane, one finger, task – with obvious enthusiasm and the fluid flourishes of an accomplished prestidigitator – his style in life.

“We got a letter from John, yesterday,” she said. “He has a four-day weekend break beginning on the 24th and is going to come home.”

Justin understood. Somehow his brother had finagled a few days away from college, so he could be with his mother and him on the ten-year anniversary of their father’s death in some military action in some far-off land for some long-forgotten purpose. Justin hated that term – *military action*. It was *war*. The term was an ill-advised attempt to whitewash the ugliness of reality.

“That’s super news! It will be so great to have him around again. I miss his constant put-downs and the bruised shoulders he so lovingly administered. Haven’t seen him since Christmas – I’m almost healed.”

They shared another smile. Justin delivered the toast to the table and took his seat. Conversation was never a problem, sometimes as much to avoid missing the absent family members around that table as to communicate.

“The piece you were playing this morning was beautiful – more difficult I’m thinking than other recent things you’ve worked on.”

“It is. Mrs. Aldridge says I’m ready to be challenged again. I’m lucky to have her as my teacher. She asked if I was going to enter the all-city music contest this year.”

“And are you?”

“Not sure. I’ll see how Mr. Mozart and I get along on this one.”

“You haven’t entered the past two years.”

Justin shoveled Wheaties into his mouth, so he couldn’t be expected to respond. That worked out fine, because his mother had more to say.

“So, your father was a concert pianist – admittedly one of the best. That doesn’t mean you are in competition with him or his success. He’d never want that. I just need to know that you understand?”

Justin sighed and put down his spoon suggesting his response would be thoughtful.

“I do understand at the intellectual level, ma, but my gut isn’t there yet. Every time I hit a sour note, it yells at me – in dad’s voice.”

“Your father never yelled at you in your entire life.”

“Oh, I know that. I can’t explain it. Like I said, I’ll see about it later on. Get through my upcoming recital first. Maybe I can talk with Johnny when he comes home. He’s always had a knack of getting my head straight – not that you don’t, also, ma. I guess I stuck my foot in that one.”

“I understand. Why do you think your father and I had *you*, anyway? It was for the sole purpose of giving Johnny somebody with a head for him to straighten out – was that even a sentence?”

“Sentence or not, it said you and I are fine and that’s all that counts. I’ve noticed since I turned 17 that I sometimes tend to say things without thinking them through.”

“You’ve only noticed that since you turned 17. The rest of the world has been dealing with it since you were 12.”

“Really? I had no idea. Sorry. When does that go away?”

“If you are your father’s son, perhaps never. He was a wonderful man, but he spoke what was on his mind, often without considering the potential consequences.”

“I remember that, then he’d come in after I got in bed at night and sit beside me and explain why he had said the things he had – wanting to be sure we were good. We always were. You’d think that after 38 years on this earth he might have learned that.”

His mother leaned across the small, round table and squeezed her son’s hand. It was as if she were delivering his dad’s reassurance. He wiped an unexpected tear away and slathered his toast in butter. The moment when the slather met the hot of the toast produced one of his favorite aromas. On more than one occasion, he had buttered the end of his nose.

For a boy to lose his father was an extreme unfairness. Mothers were great, but boys needed a father. Justin was as much saddened by the unfairness as by the outright loss – well, probably not, but sometimes it felt that way. He had learned to depend on John to act in fatherly ways toward him. He understood that was not fair to John, but then, there was a lot about their lives that wasn’t fair.

Sometimes, while he lay in bed waiting to fall asleep, he felt angry about it – the unfairness; angry *and* helpless about it; angry *and* helpless *and* very sad about it. He didn’t let it guide his outlook on life, but it was a constant thorn in his side. He sometimes planned how he would help his own son handle such feelings if they ever came up for him. He held extensive conversations with his imaginary son, but only marginally understood how much those ‘chats’ helped *him* deal with the hitches and snags life sent his way.

When they finished breakfast, Justin cleared the table, and placed the dishes and glasses in the sink where they would await his attention after supper.

“Remember, I’ll be at the Boy’s Club after school, Ma. Two more lessons and I’ll be able to test for my lifesaving certificate. Then, from four-thirty to five-thirty, I’ll be teaching swimming to the intermediates. Should be home by six unless the girls kidnap me and whisk me off to their cabin of lust and erotic goings-on in the woods south of town. I’ll call if anything comes up.”

“Make sure you have your cell phone. Cabins often

don't have land lines."

"I often wonder if other guy's mothers are as quick on the pick-up as you."

She smiled and shrugged, thinking she was already in deep enough by having bought into the whole cabin scenario.

"So, will you need me to pick you up?"

"No. Winston will have his car and he offered to take me from school to the center and deliver me home."

"Is he a careful driver?"

"He is, and if he weren't, you know I wouldn't ride with him. There's only one me and I'm not about to risk losing that."

"I know, but I'm a mother."

"And the best there ever was. I need to get outside. The bus will be here any minute. Have a great day at work. Tell Suzie if she was just 40 years younger I'd propose."

His mother wasn't convinced that Suzie wouldn't accept the proposal right then, despite the age difference. Justin's mother had definitely raised a charmer.

LAMAR:

"Lamar! I declare if you ain't out a that bed in five seconds I'm gonna throw cold water on you. I called you fifteen minutes ago."

That would *not* have been the first time he had been drenched in that bed for that same reason. He pushed back the covers.

"I'm nearly naked here, mom. Please leave and let me get ready."

She essentially ignored his request – not unexpected.

"I left money on the kitchen table. You'll need to use it for breakfast and lunch. I have to get to work early – inventory."

"Did Delbert come home last night?" Lamar asked.

"No sign of him. I got parson to promise he'd have a talk with him. Not much future for a lazy, twenty-year-old, black dropout. I'm at my wits end about him."

"At least he don't get into bad trouble with the law,

mom. That's something to be thankful for."

"Maybe. I guess. I don't know."

Lamar wrapped a towel around his mid-section and began the walk down the hall to the bathroom. His mother followed. More often than not, recently, it had become their morning routine. Their paths only crossed a few minutes a day, so they needed to make good use of the time they had together.

"You stay in the hall, mom. I'm not six anymore."

"You got basketball practice after school or a game tonight?"

"Games on Tuesdays and Fridays, mom. Just like it's been since my freshman year – same all four years. I'd think you'd have that figured out by now."

She ignored his commentary. He entered the shower.

"So, a game, then. I'll be cleaning at the Rawling Building after I get off work this afternoon. I'll have a snack in the fridge for you – a heat and eat plate. Don't wait up for me. You need your sleep. And, no girls – you hear me?"

"Yes, mom. No girls. Sometimes it seems like you think I'm trash like Delbert. I ain't. You need to get that through your head."

"I know, son. Just your crazy old mother hen, tryin' to shelter her little chick. You might as well get used to the fact that you'll always be my little chick."

"I think I picked up on that years ago, mom. Peep, peep! Did you find my grade report on the table in the dining room?"

"Yes, I did. I'm proud of you, Lamar – four "B's" and two "C's". I always knew you could do good. I guess you just needed that eligibility thing to keep you motivated."

"It does seem to work better than your switchin's, don't it?"

He smiled. She couldn't see, of course.

"I'll have to give you that one, son. I tried what I knew to try."

"Speaking of girls, mom, Carmen's mother asked me to Sunday dinner this weekend. That be okay?"

"Sure. I like Carmen. You two gettin' serious?"

“I never know how answer that. I really like her, though. She’s a great kisser.”

He was putting on the tease. He had never kissed her!

“Enough of that kind of talk in front of your mother. After church, though, you understand – *after*.”

“Yes, mom. After church. Why don’t you make Delbert go to church anymore?”

“You’re askin’ the wrong question.”

“Then, what’s the right question?”

“Why do I still insist that *you* go?”

“Okay. And . . .?”

“ ‘Cause I got a heart full a hope about you. I know you want to make somethin’ of yourself and with those Jr College basketball scholarship offers, I believe you’re gonna make it. I really do believe that. I pray to God every night about how blessed I am to have you.”

Lamar, remained silent. It was the first time his mother had come right out and said those things – those important words that he had waited so long to hear. He smiled as he washed away the tears, thinking that was not the setting in which he had anticipated hearing them – him naked as a jaybird in the shower, and his mother leaning against the hall wall, barefoot, in her bathrobe, making sure her voice could be heard over the rush of the water. He managed a chuckle. He loved her more than anything in his world. He undoubtedly didn’t indicate that to her often enough. He hoped she knew. He had absolutely no idea how to tell her. (How about, “I love you, mom.”)

Never having had a man in his life, he had received no coaching on such matters other than that from equally ill-prepared guys his age. He thought about his new feeling – finally, having actually been told she loved him and believed in him. It seemed like permission to love himself. It was like that ‘wondering’ had been hidden deep inside him for a long time waiting to pop up and help define him. Well, POP! There it was. He would have a tough time explaining the grin to the guys in the gym. They would think what they would think.

His mother left for work. He dressed. He downed what he figured was a glass of OJ from the carton in the fridge,

stuffed the ten-dollar bill into his shirt pocket, put on his jacket and left the house to make the seven-block trek to school. Cars passed him in which fathers were transporting their teenagers to the same destination. When he was younger, he often wondered how that would be – not only to have a car, but to have a dad who wanted to do that for him – see that he got safely to school. He felt lucky to live in a mostly safe neighborhood and to have been raised in the same house since kindergarten age.

His mother worked two jobs to support him and his brother. He worked at a grocery store on Saturdays. With practice after school during the winter months, he had to miss out on those late afternoon and evening week-day hours. He was proud he could buy his own clothes and have money for dates. When he could, he slipped extra money into the food jar next to the sink. He didn't know if his mother knew that or not. Probably. Nothing got past her. He had long known how fortunate he was to have her for a mom.

MARIA:

"María, ¿trabajas en el Centro Hispano después de la escuela, hoy?"

("Maria, do you work at the Hispanic Center after school, today?")

It had been Maria's mother.

"Yes, I do, but I thought we agreed when the little kids are here we're going to speak English. We're saving Spanish for supertime."

Her mother shrugged and nodded. Raising a family of five children on the wages of a day laborer was hard enough – let alone having to do it in English!

Carlos Miguel Antonio Alvarez, the five-foot-two, barrel chested father of the household, entered the kitchen. He immediately lit up any room with his full-faced smile, set just below his wide, black mustache – his pride and joy. In turn, he kissed everybody, moving up the line from his five-year-old daughter, his eight-year-old son, his eleven-year-old son, his thirteen-year-old daughter and, at the head of the line, sixteen-

year-old Maria. He never kissed his wife in public but, with five children, it was widely suspected he probably did so in private.

The parents and the two oldest daughters sat at the table. The younger children sat on the floor using low stools their father had made as places to set their food. Meals were happily noisy times, each youngster trying to commandeer a parent's attention. Somehow it all came together just fine.

Maria, a junior, and the only one of the lot who attended the high school – *Grover Cleveland High* – rode the school bus and needed to be out front and waiting by ten after eight. While at home, she bore a large responsibility for her siblings – baths, dressing, homework. Her parents were uneducated, and her father often worked ten or twelve-hour shifts. He provided muscle for a moving company and had made himself an indispensable part of their day to day operation. His employer appreciated him and had done as much as he could with raises, but still, five kids!

Before leaving the house, Maria made sure each of the younger children had their backpacks, homework and lunch bucket within easy reach. She left the overseeing of socks and shoes to her mother. It was not that her mother wasn't a capable mother – she was – but with most of the household chores on her shoulders, Maria did what she could to ease things for her. As new kids had arrived in the family, Maria was less concerned with their gender and more with how she was going to re-juggle her schedule to accommodate her responsibilities for one more.

Papa didn't allow dating until seventeen. Another Junior, Steven, always saved her a seat beside him on the bus. Maria wasn't sure if he was something more than a friend or not. He sometimes walked her home from the Hispanic Center – itself five blocks from where he lived. They had never kissed although she had allowed that to enter her fantasies.

As she slipped into her jacket, she raised her voice slightly.

“Remember, younger members of this family, you each have something to complete before supper this evening.”

Her reference had been to the Valentines they were making for their mother. On her way toward the door, she leaned down and whispered into her father's ear – *"no olvides traer a mamá algo para el día de San Valentín"*. ('Don't forget to get mama something for Valentine's Day.') She kissed her mother on the cheek, rendered a thumbs up to the rest of the crew – who returned it with enthusiastic grins – and slipped seamlessly into the big world through the kitchen door.

Inside the bus, Stephen stood, so Maria could slide in close to the window. She understood he would have done that for any girl, but she was the one who received the lion's share of his gallantry. Stephen was a special guy. She probably needed to broach the subject of romance with him. Later. Life was too full just then.

"Go to the game last night?" she asked.

"Yeah, with Freddy and Butch. Lamar scored 39 points – six, three pointers. He's got loads of talent and he's a really nice guy. I mean I don't know him to hang with him – not friends – but he always nods or says hi when we pass in the hall. I did a story on him for the school paper last semester. I suppose that's why he recognizes me. You have a good evening?"

"Yeah. Spent two hours at the Center. You'd never guess doing what?"

"Let's see. Should I act dumb and ask, 'what?' or should I astound her by saying, 'Income Tax Returns.'"

"You're right. The sad thing is how little money they made. The happy thing is that most of them will get a refund. I try to explain that if they'd take fewer deductions along through the year they'd have more money to spend each paycheck, but they seem to feel more comfortable knowing they won't owe anything. I guess I understand that; they'd have no way to raise money to pay up if they owed."

"Do you worry about everybody like this, or just the folks you talk with me about?"

It required no answer, and Maria understood.

Stephen slipped his arm across the back of the seat behind her head and shoulders. He had more things to offer.

"I have a World History test this afternoon and a short

story due on Friday for Creative Writing.”

Maria took obvious note of the arm.

“Oh! Maria. If that makes you uncomfortable, I’m sorry. I’ll take it down. I swear it happened with no thinking on my part.”

“No. That’s fine. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“Me too, I guess. You sure?”

She nodded.

“Who knows, we just may make the ‘*New Cutest Couple on Campus*’ column in the *Beacon* (the student paper). Finally, people would have a name to go with my face. Wouldn’t that make some headline: Nameless Latino Lass Steps into the Spotlight.”

“Wouldn’t that have been more consistent to say Latino Nina?”

“Probably. I guess I opted for the alliteration.”

She laughed, suggesting it had all been meant to be humorous. Inside, she wasn’t so sure. The other students knew Stephen because his father was a banker – the gym was named after his great grandfather. For him, being linked to her would probably be a put down – a turnoff to kids on the “A” list. Stephen wouldn’t care. Maria would. Even trivial things like riding the bus got complicated when you were sixteen. Maria wondered if it were that way for every one of the other 3,000 kids who attended GCHS.

JAMES:

“I heard you coming in pretty late last night, James.”

It was his father pouring his first coffee of the day in the kitchen. James, sitting at the table in his boxers, was halfway through his second bowl of cereal. How a lad who ate so much remained so small of frame and slender was, perhaps, the most puzzling question of the family history.

“I was over at George’s place with Tom and John, playing poker. Already had my homework done. We weren’t drinking, I swear.”

His father continued as if his son’s comments had been irrelevant to his own agenda.

"I have to be out of town Saturday – an Insurance Rep's meeting in Springfield. Leaving Friday afternoon. I'll leave you money here on the kitchen table. Probably be late Saturday before I get back. That should allow time for you to scoot all the girls out the back door. Invite a friend to stay over with you if you want to. No parties, you understand, but one friend is okay."

"Jennifer, it will be, then."

"Somebody of *your* gender. You know that."

"What if I'm gay. Can I still have my special – same gender – guy over?"

"I had hoped as you matured you'd have left 'dumb' behind. Whatever, I guess. Are you gay?"

"Don't know – still sampling all the goodies available in a teenager's world."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen, going on eleven, I believe you proclaimed last month."

"I don't recall, but that would seem right."

"I suppose you know I'm just kidding about this stuff, dad."

"Of course. Me, too. Have a good day."

"And night, given the new schedule."

His father left with raised eyebrows but without further comment.

As to George, Tom and John – his poker playing buddies – they didn't exist. James thought it clever to have created them in the names of the country's first three presidents. Nor were there girls or intimate partners of either sex. James was pretty much a loner – scratch the, 'pretty much'. Comments on his report cards ranged from those from his kindergarten teacher – "Does not play well with others", to second grade – 'Achieving far below his capacity,' to more recently, "suspended three days for T-Ping the principal's office."

James told himself being a loner was good – no responsibilities to anybody but him. Kids mostly talked about dumb stuff anyway. He spent a monumental number of hours a week surfing the web – girls, games, chat rooms. He really

wasn't bullied at school – more just ignored. His obvious attempts to gain recognition – notoriety – seldom yielded the results he sought. He was persistent, however. Suspensions weren't all that bad. What he missed most were the school lunches – the sounds of friendly voices in the cafeteria, more to the point.

One morning during his freshman year, the call came over the PA system for him to report immediately to the principal's office. At that moment, he was in the shower after PE. Focusing on 'immediately' and nothing else, he walked across campus, entered the main building and made his way down the hall to the office stark naked. It cost him a week away from school and the cafeteria – that was a bummer. His father's full and complete reaction to the news had been something like, "You really do need to keep your clothes on, son."

James' mother had left the two men in her life when James was six. There had been several stories provided at various times: she had run off with a Proctologist to some South Sea Island; she had died in an automobile accident in the Swiss Alps; and she had decided to become a nun – her being a Baptist made that seem unlikely. He had never been close to her, anyway, so why she was gone and where she had gone to, just weren't important to him. Occasionally, he recalled how she had sometimes kissed his forehead after he got into bed at night. That was the only family-shared affection he remembered.

The year he was in fifth grade he met a cop who treated him well, so he went through a period of getting into trouble, so he could spend time with him. The man moved. James figured it was to get away from him – too much of a pest. Only good old dad had ever stuck around for him and more and more he saw the man less and less.

After making sure the coffee maker was turned off that morning, he made his way to school on foot – a ten block walk. (He had bowed to social convention and dressed.) He would be late, but Mrs. Galey, his first hour English teacher would probably just breathe a sigh of relief when she noticed. Mrs. Galey was never unkind to James. In fact, she often

called on him when she figured he would know the proper response. Whether he knew the response or not, he typically chose to go some other, outlandish, route. He figured the kids should have laughed because his remarks were usually hilarious, but they just looked straight ahead as if he weren't even in the room.

Mrs. Galey: What is the name of the first biography of George Washington?"

James: "Let's see. Would it be, *George Washington, father of . . . wooden teeth?*"

Since he seldom bothered other students, he was seldom sent from the room. On another occasion – a very hot day before the AC was activated for the season, he removed his shoes, socks and shirt and moved up and down the aisles asking the girls if he could do the same for them. (Two weeks suspension in the air conditioning at home. Mission accomplished!)

Most of those kinds of behaviors were things of the past. Once he entered his Sophomore year, he mostly just kept quiet in class. Since no one ever required him to speak to them, it became all quite easy. Up until that year, he was content to believe he was just a loser – clearly, an unlikeable loser. When it hit him that high school would not last forever and his relatively stable – if uncomfortable – life there would have to end, he became uneasy – lost, even. What lay ahead for him?

More importantly, he wondered, how could a school system let a student get to the place he was, and clearly care more about his state of nakedness than about him, the person, James? Time and time again he had all too easily forced them to prove how little he meant to them. He'd seen his IQ scores – all above 125. He always did well on the state-wide, standardized tests given at the end of each semester – 75th percentile and above. His report cards suggested he was pretty dumb – D's and F's. He delighted in turning D's into B's and F's into A's, easier back in grade school when the cards had been hand written by the teachers. By seventh grade he had become so proficient at it, he offered his services for twenty bucks per alteration – three for forty.

After all, he wasn't unreasonable.

He had gone through school believing life was a joke – that God's true vocation was writing the humorous lines late night TV comedians used as their own. He was seriously considering a career as a joke writer and had acquired a dozen books on the topic.

If guys like Jim Carrey could rise above a lack luster school career, why couldn't he?

CHAPTER TWO

AMY – 2:

Tommy had fallen asleep on his sister's bed, waiting up for her after the Valentine Dance. She had already been debriefed downstairs by her mother. The grilling had done nothing to diminish her smile. She changed into her sleep sweats, and took a seat beside her brother, moving his hair back from across his eyes.

"That you, Amy?"

"Yes. May I ask what you are doing here?"

It had been a gentle, sweet, request.

He scooted back, up onto the pillow.

"Here to make sure you got back okay. I hear terrible things about teen boys. You survive it okay?"

"I did. It was a wonderful evening. My particular 'teen boy' was nothing but a gentleman. I am sure you would have approved. We enjoyed spending the evening together."

"The punch any good?"

"Not really, but punch at dances is more just a required social convention – the taste is secondary. You understand that?"

"I probably will in the morning when you repeat it for me. I just wanted to make sure you're okay. I'll hit the sack in my room, now."

"Well, thank you for looking out for me."

"I will always look out for you, Amy. That's why mom and dad made me, didn't you know?"

Amy watched after him as he wove his way down the hall like a sleep-walking, drunken, sailor. He was a joy in her life. She decided she needed to direct more regular attention his way. Her life was becoming busy with school, the volunteer tutoring she did Saturday mornings, and dating as the opportunities arose. She would be away at college the following year and those special times with him would no longer be possible. She hadn't yet let herself begin dealing with the sense of loss she knew she'd feel. She smiled as she closed her door. Tommy was one of a kind.

Saturday mornings, the youngsters made breakfast for the family. It was never a surprise – always waffles with a choice of maple syrup, raspberry preserves cut by a quarter with mixed juices and warmed, or, Tommy's reliable suggestion, peanut butter – uncut, unheated, right out of the jar, often directly onto his tongue where it awaited a bite sized morsel of the deeply pocked treat.

Amy had been regaling her brothers with a monologue about the previous evening. After ten minutes, Marc, held up his watch – pointing to it.

"I call time."

It was an understanding, invoked by family members to prevent anybody from dominating the conversation. He took up *his* concern.

"So, for *my* first dance-date, I'm thinking of weaving bands of colorful fabric in and out of the spokes on my wheels, highlighted by flickering lights. What you think?"

Marc had intended it as a joke – and only a joke. Try as they would, the others couldn't see it as humorous. They remained unresponsive.

"That's all I got, Siblings. Tommy, I guess it's up to you. Make me proud, kid!"

"It makes us sad when you use your disability as the source of jokes," Amy said.

"So, you'd rather I'd give in to the dark feelings I have about it and mope around, depressed and dejected."

"Sorry," Amy continued. "That was just your siblings, selfishly revealing their own sense of helplessness and sadness."

Marc was ready to set them straight.

“As our parents have undoubtedly preached at you down through the years – when out of my range of hearing – ‘Point out your brother’s strong points to him. Build him up. Help him feel good about himself’.

“Let me tell you a story – it will be brief. You know the first time I truly felt like a real person – separate from my disability – a fully capable human being? Of course, you don’t, or the story wouldn’t be necessary. It was when Mom and Dad brought new baby Tommy home from the hospital. The first thing dad did – the very first thing – was lay you in my lap, Tommy. There I was, four years old, my parents just expecting that I would do it right with no instructions or cautions. They had faith that I could handle this newest, very precious, part of our lives. It’s one of the greatest moments for me, ever. I decided there and then not to dwell on what I couldn’t do, but on what I could do – what I wanted to do, even. When I make fun of my physical problem, I’m like telling it off, showing it that it can’t predetermine my life – can’t limit me to what I can and what I can’t do. You must never make those times the basis of pity – it’s me, flexing my Hulk-like muscles, declaring my independence . . . Amen, I guess.”

Amy sniffed back tears but launched a sincere smile and nod. Tommy laid a full-power punch into his brother’s shoulder. It had to have hurt. It indicated to Marc that he had gotten through to at least one of them. He’d give Amy the benefit of the doubt – she was, after all, female – at that moment in his life the most baffling entity in Mother Nature’s vast array of entities.

On cue – five minutes after the first *waffle waft* entered the living room – their parents walked through the door. They took seats. Mr. Adams reached for the peanut butter.

“That’s peanut butter, dad?” Tommy said puzzled.

“I know. I figured I’d give it a try this morning. If a bright and observant young man like yourself says it’s the way to go, then I have to believe there is some truth to it. Okay?”

Tommy beamed and nodded, sitting back, watching his father’s every move – every slight change of expression. (Had the lad ever been at a loss for words, before?) Tommy looked

at Marc, catching his glance. He pointed to his own lap, offered a cradling motion, and nodded. Marc understood. What baby Tommy had been to him, peanut butter on their father's waffle was to Tommy. They grew immediately closer. (Later, it would be his father who suggested they try combining peanut butter and preserves. They liked it, although, peanut butter as a singles act continued to be Tommy's favorite!)

JUSTIN – 2:

Justin's mother's phone rang as she was setting the sack of groceries on the kitchen counter after work.

"Hello."

"Justin, here – your completely trustworthy and delightful son, mother dearest."

"You know I'll say, yes, but please go ahead and ask, anyway."

She heard two boys giggling on the other end. Could it be she was on speaker?

"So, here's the deal, Ma. Winston got some money from his grandma for his birthday and offered to take me out for a burger for supper – like his celebration."

"Will you be staying close by?"

"*Rusty's Burgers and Fries*, over on 10th street."

"Girls?"

"If we're lucky. Nothing planned."

"Sounds like fun. Bring him in when you get here. I'd like to meet him and perhaps he could help you eat the chocolate cake I'm about to whip up."

There was a pause while Justin relayed the offer on the other end. His mother smiled at the apparent seriousness required to deal with it.

"He can't have nuts."

"So, you're saying he can't spend time with us?"

"Mo-om."

"No nuts, I promise. Can he have fudge ripple ice cream?"

"I didn't know we had any."

“We don’t and won’t have unless you stop and get some.”

“I can take a hint.”

“Hint? I didn’t intend it as a hint – you want cake, you bring ice cream!”

“Great. Be there by seven thirty, okay.”

“Homework?”

“It’s Friday.”

“Oh, that’s right. Okay, then. Seven thirty. Love you, son.”

“Love you, mom.”

It warmed her heart, of course, when he said that. Even better was that he never hesitated even when his friends were present. For having had to deal with such a horrific event so early in his life, he found helpful ways of coping. They seldom spoke of it – the tragedy – although his father’s name came up often – ‘Dad would have loved that,’ ‘I wonder what Dad would have had to say about that?’

He had died while on tour, entertaining the troupes in the middle east when the outpost where he was overnighing came under attack. It was the second tour in which he had participated. He loved his country dearly and wanted to do what he could. Early on, both Justin and his mother – separately – felt honest anger at him for what had happened, each of them thinking he should have been home taking care of his family instead of playing some piano concerto in E flat major for soldier boys he didn’t even know.

Those feelings had been buried long ago – well, mostly. Justin had found ways of slipping good, male models into his life – the band director, the cross-country coach, the director of the Boy’s Club. Early in his life, every Tuesday evening, there had been a Dad and Lad Skinny dip at the Club, a holdover from the old YMCA days. Once girls had been incorporated into the Club’s programs, Justin continued to campaign for *‘Him and Her Skinny Dip Night’*, but it didn’t seem to be catching on with the board of directors. (There was a ground swell of support from the guys and more than one might expect from the girls.)

The boys arrived right at seven thirty. Most of the cake

had been destroyed by eight, and the melting ice cream drunk by eight fifteen. (They had purchased it before supper. Lesson learned!) Winston, just as Justin's mother was sure he would be, turned out to be a neat kid with an obvious positive outlook on life. He and his mother belonged to a conservation group – *Save the Wild Spinach*, or something like that. Justin had good judgement about such things – friends, not spinach. She wondered how he would react when she finally got up the courage to introduce, Gerald, her special friend from work. Perhaps she would broach the subject the weekend John would be home.

Justin stood out by Winston's car for a half hour before they parted. How they could have had anything left to say after having been together for almost five hours was hard for her to understand – or perhaps it wasn't. Maybe she was just jealous about the time he spent with his friends instead of her. She hoped that wasn't pathetic – she assumed it was – certifiably, so – so was glad her son was handling it.

When he entered the house, he spoke.

"So, what'll it be? Cards, Monopoly, Clue, The Deadly Devils vs The Gods of the Nether World?"

"You actually have that Deadly Devil game?"

"No. It's free 'til the end of the month on line."

"And you like such games, why?"

"Pitting my skill against other people's skills."

"What sorts of skills?"

"Seeing if I can kill more of the opposing force than it can kill of mine."

"Did you just hear what you said – killing, and apparently enjoying it."

"Now, now. Remember that game at carnivals where you throw a ball at three milk bottles stacked up?"

"Yes, but you don't try and *kill* milk bottles."

"My point exactly. The opposing force is more like a hoard of armed milk bottles to me, just waiting to be blown to bits. I never for a second think of them as flesh and blood people. Gosh, Ma, you think I'm some sort of monster."

"Is that how all the players think?"

"Probably not. But you asked about *me*."

“Do you see any potential for such games to have adverse effects on kids who choose to play them.”

“It seems to me, guys who enjoy the killing part, would also get all lathered up about killing Colonel Mustard, in the hall, with the candlestick. I get *your* point. I suppose guys with a tendency for violence probably do get turned on by it. *My* point is, I’m not one of them. Remember, I’m the one who refused to eat the rabbit, once I found out dad had shot it while hunting with his friends.”

Silence, then Justin continued, thoughtfully.

“I get the point you *didn’t* state, too, ma. *Young* kids who spend time killing the enemy in a web game may not be able to differentiate between the fantasy and the real world. It might lead the poorest supervised of them down the wrong path – hurting others to solve their problems.”

“Will you expand on that speech for the PTO, son? There’s to be a panel discussion on the topic next month.”

“You serious?”

“Very. I’ve seldom heard the positive and negative possibilities laid out so succinctly – so well – by a young person.”

“Really. Huh. Good for me, I suppose. Sure, if I can fit it into my busy social calendar. . . Succinctly! Think of that. Share the last of the cake?”

“Absolutely!”

She stood, slowly, mounting an angry expression, and extending her arms, knuckle-crawling them across the table as she leaned in toward Justin. He burst a grin, wondering ‘what in the world?’

“So, now, right here on the kitchen table. Bring it on, kid. *Clue*. I’m going to hang that nosey Mrs. White by her scrawny lily white neck and get rid of her meddling once and for all, punk.”

Chuckles. More chuckles. Jiggling bellies. Wet tissues.

(It turned out be Professor Peacock, in the den, with the lead pipe, but none of that really mattered.)

LAMAR – 2:

As he got within a block of school the high fives began and didn't end even after he was inside. Lamar was popular, partly because he was the star athlete in the school, partly because he treated everybody so well and partly because he refused to take offense at the cruel comments some students seemed required to make to him. He was poor. He was black. He was not on the 'A' social list – nor did he want to be.

He offered everybody his wonderful smile and spoke to those he knew.

Finally, there she was – Carmen. They were not a couple, but they seemed to be more than friends. They made their ways toward each other through the growing crowd in the hallway. Lamar had loaned his brother, Delbert, fifty dollars several weeks before with the promise he would have it repaid before the Valentine's Dance. Lamar knew that wasn't going to happen, but Delbert was his brother. He had a speeding ticket to pay – at least that was the unlikely story for a guy without a car – fifty bucks or a week in city jail.

Lamar no longer bothered checking out such stories. They were always lies, but Delbert was his brother and family was important. Bottom line: there was no money to take Carmen to the dance. Carmen would have gladly done without a corsage and she'd not have thought twice about being with him in slacks and a dress shirt rather than a suit or tux, but Lamar was proud. He did, however have an alternative plan.

“Got somethin' to run by you. Okay if you say, no.”

“What?”

“You know why I haven't asked you go with me to the dance.”

“Yes, dumbest reasons I can imagine. I'm not wanting to be with a suit or tux or flaunt a chest full of flowers. I just want to be with you. It's all about your insufferable pride.”

Pride bashing aside, he pressed on.

“So, here's a plan. We each go stag, find each other after the band starts playin' and spend the evenin' together. I have the ten bucks to get you in. What do you say?”

“Of course, I say, yes. You know you won’t be fooling anybody.”

“I guess I’m the only one I need to fool.”

“You are simply unbelievable. You know, if you showed up without any tickets at all, the chaperones would let you in anyway.”

“Now, that wouldn’t be honorable, would it?”

“I guess if in your mind, your plan *is* honorable, I agree. Will you wear your scarlet shirt and white tie?”

“That’s my plan – with my black slacks and loafers it should look acceptable, right?”

“It will look the best. Band is scheduled to start at eight,” she reminded him.

“It’s a date, then – well sort of?”

“As far as I’m concerned it’s a full-fledged date.”

They would make an interesting pair – Lamar six feet seven, and Carmen five feet two – stretching the point. Although neither flaunted it, they were both fine dancers. Carmen had performed at her uncle’s café since she was ten. Lamar had grown up garnering tips in a hat on street corners and in smoke filled pool halls.

“I’m stoked!” he said to himself. He pulled air as he turned to walk to first period at the other end of the hall. He offered high-fives to kids he couldn’t remember having seen before – even Miss Redgrave, the librarian, got the feel of his strong, large palm. She tittered herself on into the teacher’s lounge.

The rest of the school day was uneventful. Practice went well, but then, for Lamar it always went well – he refused to let it be any other way. He was out of the showers and on his way home by six. That gave him time to eat and get dressed for the dance.

Delbert had been there. The food his mother had prepared for him was gone. He checked his brother’s room. With clothes strewn everywhere, it smelled worse than the locker room. He had never understood Delbert. His philosophy was simple: do whatever it takes, to whomever it takes, to get whatever you want to take. He checked his own room. His music system was gone. He needed to change the

locks but knew he'd only find a way to break in – the flimsy back door or any one of four first floor windows. Something needed to be done. His mother was way too lax with him. He understood how much she loved him, but sometimes love meant you had to do what was hard, not what was easy. He needed to have a talk with her.

She survived on so little sleep, Lamar was hesitant to keep her up late talking. Maybe some morning, though at that time of day she was always rushed. Perhaps, he just needed to find a way of handling it himself. Delbert had nothing of value – all those things had been sold or pawned – so Lamar could no longer make trades for things Delbert had stolen from him and their mother.

“Two things,” he said out loud to himself: “I’m not going to let him ruin my evening – coach said we could stay out until midnight and I fully intend to. And, I’m not going to spend my time thinking about him while I’m with Carmen.”

There were apples under the sink. It wasn't a meal, but after the third one his stomach stopped growling. An on the go young man his size needed lots of calories. He would take a Granny Smith along to the dance in case he needed to quiet the rumblings. And, there would be punch and cookies.

He looked himself over one final time, ran a brush through his hair and left the house for the dance. He was more excited than he thought he would be. The big event was being held in the older, ‘Girls Gym’. The pep squad was sponsoring it and they had spent long hours decorating. A ‘King and Queen of Hearts’ would be crowned – the vote had taken place in home room that morning, but the results had been kept secret. Lamar understood he was one of the most popular students in school. He couldn't fathom why, but he understood he was. He offered up a short, crossed-fingered prayer that he would not be chosen King – slumming there, as he would be, in his red shirt, white tie, and black slacks. That just wouldn't fit the royal requirements. He'd feel foolish. He knew he shouldn't; he wasn't the clothes he wore; everything his mother had taught him said that he shouldn't, but he would – more for Carmen than for him – well, probably not.

MARIA – 2:

Maria worked late at the Hispanic Center. Apparently, she had been doing such an excellent job at finding deductions that refunds were blossoming. Everybody wanted *María y su lápiz mágico* (Maria and her magic pencil). She walked in the door at nine o'clock. The younger children were already in bed.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Mama, but the others needed my help, too."

The refrigerator door was blossoming with valentines. Maria was pleased that the younger ones had come through.

Her mother had set out juice, snacks, chips and dip on the kitchen table. Maria welcomed them but thought her Mama had gone a bit overboard.

"I am told there is a dance tonight," her Mama said. "Why did you not tell me?"

"Oh, you know. No boy asked me – I guess that's the main reason."

Mama's eyes began to sparkle.

"What, Mama?"

Mama's sparkling eyes were always a reason to become suspicious.

Music began to play in the living room. I wasn't Papa's kind of music. Maria grew curious – puzzled. She stood up from the table and moved somewhat cautiously through the door munching on a *Cheesy Ritz*.

"Now, what's the most beautiful girl in school doing in her own living room the night of the big dance?"

"Stephen! What on earth is going on?"

"I feel like dancing. How about you?"

She looked at her mother who offered nothing more than a smile as she swished her long dress and moved up the stairs, out of sight.

"You and Mama? You don't even know my Mama."

"But, I know somebody who knows your Mama, your Papa."

"How? I don't understand."

"His moving company recently moved things for one of

my father's business. I happened to be there. One thing led to another. When I found out who he was, I introduced myself. We hit it off, immediately – he's a great guy. I asked him if I could take you to the Dance – I don't know why, it just came out. He said he'd have to run that by your Mama, first. I dropped by the other evening while you were at the Center. I was about to ask you on the bus the other morning when you started talking about your work and how important it was and what your schedule was and . . . well, I figured I could never compete with something that was that important in your life. So, the three of us put our sneaky heads together and *voila* – here we are."

"I look a mess, Stephen."

"I look a messier."

"I don't know what to say."

"The only thing you need to say, is 'yes', when I ask if I may have this dance. Listen. I have the school radio station on – it's broadcasting the dance. That's the band from the gym."

"Well?"

"Well, what?" he asked.

"Are you going to ask me to dance?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. May I have this dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask, kind sir – and I mean it, I *really* thought you'd never ask."

They engaged smiles and began – a bit tentatively at first. They relaxed. She lay her head against his chest. He drew her closer. They had soon managed a slow, gently comfortable style. They were privately impressed how well they moved together. Maria allowed a few tears. She made no move to conceal them. He lowered his head against hers. It quickly became a wonder-filled time between them.

Suddenly, he stopped abruptly and hit himself repeatedly on the forehead with the heel of his hand.

"Whatever is wrong, Steven?"

Her voice suggested concern.

"I brought you flowers and forgot to give them to you. I'm a dunce. I'm sorry. Willoughby, the butler who raised me, told me flowers were the most important thing."

They were inside a fancy white paper bag on an end table. He picked it up and removed them.

“I got a wrist corsage because I was sure I’d prick you in some embarrassing place with the other kind.”

“How beautiful. Thank you. You really think I’m pretty?”

“Oh, my yes. Now don’t try to return that because I know I’m still a teen boy whose arms, legs and nose have outgrown my body and face – Willoughby assures me the next few months should rectify that. He says I should have seen my father at this age. He told me that on Dad’s first date – he had raised my father before me – things were going so badly he took out his wallet and offered her money if she just wouldn’t walk away. I’m not sure if she took it, but regardless, it seemed to work – he and mother have been married for twenty years. I’m talking too much. I’m *a/ways* talking too much.”

She held his hands between them to decrease the chance of another frontal attack on his forehead.

“Then stop,” Maria said quietly, placing two fingers against his lips.”

They danced in silence for quite some time. The music was interrupted by the voice of Alexander Winthrop the fifth – he MC’ed everything at school. The saying was, give him a mike and he’d MC his own appearance before a firing squad.

“Listen,” Stephen said.

A.W., or *The 5th*, as he was called at school, continued.

“Drum roll please. It is time to announce and crown this year’s King and Queen of Hearts. May I first take just a moment to . . .”

It was as far as *that* got – ‘boooooooooo’. Mercifully he moved on.

“Without further ado, I present this year’s royal couple – Lamar Jackson and Carmen Sanchez. There they are in the spotlight folks. A big hand, please as they lead us in the coronation dance.”

Suddenly, he lowered his voice as if announcing a golf tournament.

“Lamar looks uneasy – embarrassed, even. What’s that

all about? He shrugs and indicates his clothes by running his fingers down the sides of his beautiful red shirt. That is NOT what was intended by the Dance Committee. Wait. Would you believe this. Some of the other boys are shedding their jackets and dropping them where they stand. Every single guy is following suite – so to speak. A quiet applause breaks out across the onlookers.

“What’s this? Lamar is removing his tie and unbuttoning his top shirt button. The other boys are removing their ties and joining him in twirling them in the air above their heads. Now, *this* may be a first, folks. Lamar reaches for his belt buckle and – oh, I see – he’s funning us, only pretending to unfasten it. The crowd goes wild. This will certainly go down in GCH history as a first. Back to dancing folks. Band leader, let’s have a memorable, slow dance in honor of this years, Valentine Dance Royalty.”

“Lamar may be the most popular boy at school,” Maria began, “but one Stephen Reading is the most popular boy in *this* room.”

“They say possession is 90% of the law.”

“Consider yourself possessed then, *Reading* – wait, that may have come out wrong. Dance, you fool and save the reputation of this wayward wench!”

Eventually, the clock struck mid-night.

“I promised your parents I’d be out the door by 12:01.”

“Fine. I’d rather you’d kiss me good night on the front porch, anyway.”

JAMES – 2:

The night of the dance, James showered and donned his suit and shiny shoes for his date with Eleanor – as in Roosevelt. His fantasies were politically neutral. He supposed they weren’t the fantasies of a raving lunatic, since he knew they weren’t real – mostly just wonderful jokes to which only he was privy. The world’s loss. He arrived at the gym with a corsage in its clear, plastic container and surveyed the large room. There she was. He made his way through the hoard of kids to where she stood some distance back from the

punch table. He spoke.

“Mrs. Galey. How nice to see you this evening. I heard you were to be a chaperone. I have something of a conundrum on my hands. My date reports that she came down with the galloping heebiejeepies and can’t come, so I was wondering if you would do me the honor of taking these flowers off my hands. I’d wear them myself, but you know the other guys – they’d make comments about me being a closet . . . florist.”

Mrs. Galey chuckled.

“I would be honored to wear them, James. Thank you.”

“I think this is the longest conversation the two of us have ever had without you sending me to the principal’s office.”

“It may well be. It *still* could, you know. Measure your words carefully.”

She offered a wonderful smile and held out her arm so he could slip the flowers on her wrist.

“I suppose a hold-you-close-and-feel-your-heat-beat-and-smell-your-hair-dance is out of the question.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps you should ask my husband – there – assistant police chief Albert Galey.”

“I’m like a ghost in the wind. Was never here. Flowers? Whatever are you speaking of, Madam, who I have never seen before?”

She had to chuckle – and chuckle and chuckle.

He ducked into the crowd and disappeared. James was the type of student she both enjoyed and feared. He wore two faces – one she would adopt in a moment, and one she would keep in a locked, padded room – with an armed guard at the door.

James made his way through the throng, playfully raising his hand for high-fives that no one ever accepted. It was how he expected – no, *knew*, it would be – him approaching and accepting them and them rejecting him. Boys turned their backs and unattended girls hastened themselves in the opposite direction. He had heard a few whispered comments: “Creep,” “Creepy kid”, so the evening had not been a total loss. A few had, in those ways, paid homage to

him.

After ten minutes, James figured his work was done, and left. He was never sure just what his *work* was, but he believed he was quite good at it. The others showed their disdain for him and he made every effort to appear friendly and accepting to them. He figured maybe it was guilt he was going for. Let them ignore him but never, ever, ignore one of them. He figured he just might be the premier practitioner of that art in the entire world.

James seldom contemplated whether he was being socially successful in that endeavor. He did, however, spend time trying to figure out why he was turning out to be such an unacceptable human being. No! *That* was not an accurate statement of the way he characterized his concern. Better stated, why was everybody so dumb they didn't understand what a high-level guy he was – smart, witty, and really not bad looking as teenage fence posts went.”

Back when he was a little kid he could not abide being bossed around, and, as a little kid, everybody *is* bossed around – day and night, at home, church and school, by parents, teachers, strangers, cops, and worst of all priests. At age seven, he had set a priest's robe on fire. (Canola oil on wool rapidly bursts into a variety of pretty, sparkling colors.) James loved fire – matches, candles, bond fires, kitchen ranges. He assumed he would find Hell comforting. He wondered how it would appear if he set Janitor Filbert's shoulder-length hair on fire. His father had, all quite irrationally, sided with James on the flaming priest issue.

Neither of them had been to any church since the Father Flare affair. Whether that was his father's choice, or they had been banned for life had not been made clear to James. Regardless, he was fine with it. Suppose the same would happen if he set principal Burton on fire – banned for life from school? That was not something James would want. In order to straighten out the other kids, he needed to be there with them, confronting *them* with *himself* every day. It was no small task.

James often wondered why his father took his side on issues where everybody else in the universe understood the

boy had been in the wrong and needed to have some consequence imposed. Perhaps he wasn't worth correcting. Perhaps it had been determined he was incapable of abiding the straight and narrow. Recently, James had been wondering if he garnered all the strength within his being and put it behind a single blow to his father's chin, if the man would even make a move to protect himself or strike back. It had become something of an obsession. In his fantasies, he saw his father retaliating by administering horrific beatings, which ended with James looking up into his face from a pool of blood, thanking him.

Ah, maybe his father had guilt feelings about what a lousy parent he was – about the family being split up – about him having so recklessly procreated and unleashed the *Demon James* on the world. Maybe he couldn't bring himself to discipline his boy because he believed he, himself, was responsible. Sometimes James wished he hadn't torched that priest. Maybe he'd have had some sort of answer. He was fat, walked like a duck, and spoke with an accent, so he probably had nothing useful to offer.

More and more, James was finding that people who seemed 'different', felt threatening. Like Mrs. Galey, for example. She often sounded as though she liked him. People did not like James. Thank goodness for George, John, Thomas and Eleanor – they never so much as wavered one millimeter in their disapproving reactions to him.

CHAPTER THREE

AMY – 3:

Saturday morning. At 9:30 her father chauffeured Amy to her art class down town before he ran some errands. She was a talented painter, preferring water color, often characterized as the most difficult of the picture arts. He would pick her up at eleven. At ten their mother took the boys in the opposite direction, across town to Marc's physical therapy session – sixty minutes of mostly painful exercises in a heated pool. Tommy was learning how to administer some of the training moves, so he could do them at home. He hated it. He loved it. He hated seeing his brother endure the obvious pain. He would have it no other way than that he helped on the slim hope it might someday make life better for him. The doctor said the mere presence of pain was a very hopeful sign.

At 11:30 they all met at *Pedro's Pizza Plaza* for lunch. It boasted over a million topping combinations. The boys were determined to sample every, last one. Sometimes, when Marc reached just too far across the table, a tear would well up in his eye. The pain did not stop when therapy stopped. Marc would not allow help from the others. Understanding that, Amy managed a constant flow of diversionary conversation to help keep things on an upbeat path. It was the one time in his week that Tommy remained relatively quiet.

"You have a good class this morning?" her mother asked.

“Pretty good. Our teacher selected one of mine for the all-city art show to be held out at the mall in a couple of weeks – the lily pad in the variegated green water with light and reflections. So far that makes five of mine.”

“Marc swam all the way across the pool this morning – the deep end,” Tommy said. “His therapist said his freestyle arm stroke is one of the best he’s ever seen for a 13-year-old.”

“He did say that,” Marc offered. “I know I’ll never win a race, but it’s really nice to hear my form is so good. My next goal is to do that same distance under water. Funny boy here offered to help me practice by holding my head under water in the bath tub for five minutes at a time as part of my training.”

It was worth natural smiles and chuckles.

“What’s up with Jerry?” Amy asked. “I think that’s his name – the boy with MS who comes and just sits up in the shallow end?”

She had accompanied Marc to therapy before Tommy began demanding that he be the one.

“He doesn’t come anymore,” Marc said. “I feel bad about that.”

“Because his condition has worsened?” she asked.

“No. His parents have too many bills and they need to both work on Saturday mornings,” Tommy said.

“That’s terrible. I could tell he really liked being there even if he couldn’t do much.”

“I know,” Marc said. “Having him there made me feel really fortunate.”

“Because you are so much more competent?” his mother asked.

“Gosh no! Because I really like talking with him. He is a great friend. He’s something of a computer whizz. Every time we spoke I learned something new.”

“You know how to contact him?” their father asked.

“I have his email.”

“What if we arrange to pick him up and take him with you, Saturday mornings?”

“Could we? That would be so great. I’ll E him up when we get home. I’ve wanted to before but for some reason I didn’t feel right about it – maybe remind him of something he

enjoyed but couldn't do anymore. He needs somebody to be with him all the time he's there."

"My final Saturday lesson is next week. After that, I can do that if his parents will allow it," Amy said. "He's a sweetheart."

"But, I'm still a sweeterheart, right," Tommy asked apparently being serious with an evident edge of jealousy.

"Always. From your sweet little toes to your sweet little ears."

"Yuck. So long as I'm your favorite, okay."

"You know my third favorite thing about being here at this table right now?" their mother said/asked.

She didn't wait for a response.

"That, aside from way too much gluten in the crust, the rest actually provides a pretty well-balanced meal – veggies, meats, cheese."

"What's the first and second reasons?" Tommy asked.

"That we all get to be here together – family – and that we always manage to have such wonderful conversations while we're here."

Four other faces nodded unable to speak because their mouths were filled with 'gluten-laced-well-balanced'.

Once back home, Marc slept. He always slept after therapy. Tommy read in his room and their parents went grocery shopping. Amy talked on her phone with her boyfriend. The door to her room was slightly ajar, so Tommy could hear when he strained hard enough. It appeared that whatever had been wrong between them was better. Perhaps dances were good for something after all.

At ten, it was difficult for him to understand the boyfriend/girlfriend thing. The topics she talked about with him on the phone were the same things she talked about with everybody else. He understood kissing was important in that relationship, but they couldn't kiss over the phone, so, the whole idea of wasting hours talking that way just made no sense.

He emailed Jerry for Marc and arranged for Jerry's dad to call his dad and talk about Saturday mornings. He also got a few computer tips – websites to which he could go to get

free pictures that weren't filled with those annoying swirls and X's that ruined the whole image. Jerry insisted he was doing fine. Tommy had overheard a conversation a few months before that suggested he wasn't expected to see many more birthdays. That saddened Tommy greatly. Sometimes life stunk. He couldn't imagine how terrible it would be to lose any member of his family. He went back to his book – a cozy little bedtime story – *'The Monster that Ate Rhode Island'*.

Amy soon managed her way out of her conversation with her boyfriend and called a classmate from her Trig class. They really weren't friends, but Amy knew she was struggling to understand the topic they had just begun, so she wanted to see if she could perhaps help get her caught up before class on Monday. After a half hour, she believed she had been able to get her up to speed.

The youngsters heard their parents enter the kitchen and made their ways down stairs to help put away the food and see what treats had managed their ways into the sacks.

The boys were more treat oriented than help oriented so swooped in and soon left, doing a good deal of damage to the economy-sized sack of strawberry twisters. Amy remained to help.

"Your mom says you had a good time last night," her father said. "I'm happy for you."

"The best. We danced almost every dance together. Afterwards we had burgers at Rusty's. It was packed with kids so not much privacy. That was fine. Everybody clearly had a good time. For a holiday that celebrates a greedy old man whose subjects hated him so much they killed and ate him, it's actually a really nice event."

"I assume you can document that rendition of St. Valentine," his mother asked.

"I'm not footnoting it in a term paper, mom. Loosen up!"

Amy left abruptly. It is what adolescents often did when confronted about little things like *facts* to support contentions.

JUSTIN – 3:

Justin made good grades – mostly A's and B's, with a

very rare C. He was good about getting his homework done and took seriously opportunities to do extra credit projects. Junior English was mostly composition. He enjoyed writing. He had to have a topic turned in for his Junior Essay by Friday of the following week. Most of his friends were dealing with things about school or the city that griped them – cafeteria lunches, too little time between classes, poor relations with the police, that long red light at South and Main – things like that. Justin wanted to tackle something more meaningful and had narrowed it to two possible topics. He dropped by his teacher’s room after school.

“I have two ideas for my essay, Mr. Merritt and I wondered if you could help me think it through.”

Mr. Merritt indicated a seat; he leaned back against his desk.

“So, what do you seem to be drawn between?”

“Hate and child psychology.”

“Too broad for me to get a handle on. Can you get more specific?”

“That’s exactly what my mom said, by the way, so I have been doing some thinking about it. I’m really bothered by the hate and intolerance I see here at school – race against race, rich against poor, the jocks against the physically inept, the ‘ins’ against the ‘outs’ – socially, I mean – not belly button-wise.”

The man acknowledged the humor with a quick smile.

“How would you approach such a topic, Justin?”

Justin grinned.

“That probably *would* be a good place to start, wouldn’t it? Well, I’ve been wondering why some kids hate and some don’t. It doesn’t seem to be caused by those things – their race, finances and things like that because it seems to come from everywhere – just willy-nilly.”

“I’d say that’s a good solid topic. How would you get your data?”

“Hmm. Observation and interviews I guess. I’m sure there are books on the topic.”

“I suggest you stay out of dark alleys while you’re gathering your data,” he said offering a smile.

He shifted topics.

“And what about the other possibility – child psychology?”

“I had Dr. Ashley’s class in psychology first semester this year and he really got me interested in it – especially child psychology. I just haven’t been able to pin down a specific topic.”

“It seems to me you may have pinned down a good one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Think about the intersection of the two interests you have suggested: ‘why is there hate’ and ‘child psychology’ – often called *developmental* psychology.”

Justin began to nod.

“What are the factors that lead to the development of hate?”

“Now, streamline the topic to fit the situation you were speaking about here – at Grover Cleveland High School.”

“Well, let’s see. I could figure out what relevant groups we have represented here between which tensions arise – like I already stated – and then see if I can determine how hate is fostered within each group as kids grow up.”

“That’s half a start.”

“What do you mean, half?”

“Are *you* apt to hate other kids, Justin?”

“No. Never. Oh! I see, and, *also*, how some kids get like inoculated against being haters.”

“Sounds like you’re onto a fascinating project – but be warned, if you use the phrase, ‘get *like* inoculated’ in that paper, you fail.”

They shared smiles and chuckles.

“I will also avoid another of your pet peeves – using ‘fun’ as an adjective.”

“THAT may get you bonus points.”

“Can I – May I, (sheepish grin) give you an outline to look over before I begin writing? I’m only ever going to have one opportunity to write a Junior Essay and I want it to be the best I can do – and, yes, that probably was a paraphrase of my mother’s take on it all.”

“Of course. You’ve taken on a big project. Don’t dawdle.”

Justin stood, wondering if he should offer a shake. He decided against it. Instead, he walked through the door into the hall and then stuck his head back into the room to deliver his parting shot.

“This is going to be *like* the most *fun* project I have ever did!”

Mr. Merritt playfully tossed an eraser in his direction.

Justin had very good relationships with all his teachers – only Mr. Merritt, however, would have flung incoming in his direction. It was too bad he was happily married.

Justin was doing homework on the kitchen table when his mother entered the house after work. He looked up and smiled.

“Thanks, mom, and I really mean that.”

“You’re welcome, son, and I *really* mean that. What’s this all about?”

He rose to meet her, taking one of the two sacks of groceries.

“Hate,” he offered as his full and complete answer.

“I’ll need more, but I’m agin’ it in case that was a question.”

“I talked to Mr. Merritt today about my essay and he got me to thinking about how lucky I’ve been to have you and dad as my parents.”

She cocked her head, waiting for more as she began putting things away.

“Some parents teach their children to hate. Some teach them *not* to hate and I mean it’s more than just not teaching hate, it involves an additional step, *how and why not hate*. Am I getting close making my point clear?”

“You are. I doubt if most young people understand about that ‘extra’ step, as you put it. Thanks for noticing, I suppose.”

“It was mostly my teacher, but I’m sure I would have come to understand eventually – hopefully before I have ten kids under foot.”

“Ten? Have you consulted your future wife about that

yet?”

He offered a shrug and his great grin.

“What’s with homework in the kitchen instead of in your room?”

“You’ll need to follow this carefully, Ma. I’m a great kid – I believe *that*, you believe *that*, most everybody who knows me, believes that. I’m a great kid because you raised me to be a great kid. So, instead of grabbing burgers with Winston, I should be spending more time with you, showing you how much I appreciate you rather than being off some place ignoring you.”

“Okay. Here’s the thing, son. You’ll need to follow this carefully.”

Smiles.

“Right now, you have two main life tasks to accomplish *well* – first, attend to your education with great care, and second, grab burgers with Winston. You and I established our forever relationship years ago. Now is the time you need to get social relationships and the intimacy that goes with them worked out, and you can only do that by being with other kids your age.”

“So, in effect you are ordering me to go forth and be intimate with as many of my age mates as possible.”

It was the second time that day the boy had to dodge incoming – that time, a semi-damp dish towel.

LAMAR – 3:

Although to all appearances, Lamar seemed naturally outgoing, he was shy and retiring by nature. As his athletic skill had become recognized, he was forced into the limelight and he had learned to play the part – meet high five with high five, respond to hundreds of greetings every day in the hall, make the required, repetitive, lame remarks at pep rallies. There were times he didn’t like it, but he kept his eye on his goal – an education – and went through the necessary motions, mostly with a smile.

He often wished the other kids would just leave him alone. It was as if because he provided a special skill for his

school, they all believed they owned a part of him. Sometimes, when he was alone, he would pound his fist over it and even throw things. He hoped that didn't mean he had a Delbert-like streak in him.

At an early age, Lamar came to understand his brother was no good from the tips of his toes to the hair on his head – no good. His *word* was not good. His *intentions* were only ever selfish. He gladly took advantage of others. More than once, while growing up, Delbert forced Lamar to take the blame for things Delbert had done. The past six months, Lamar had been better able to stand up for himself. If “Big D”, as Delbert referred to himself, got into trouble it was, finally, going to be *his* trouble and not Lamar's.

Saturday morning, after practice, he called Carmen to let her know what an enjoyable time he had at the dance. He thanked her. She echoed his feeling and took it a step further.

“Now that everybody assumes we like each other, isn't it about time we admit it, too?”

“It's not that easy. I got practice and games and my job. You know I have to study harder than most of the other guys. Next year me and you will be going our separate ways. It just don't seem like a good time to get involved.”

“The way you held me close on the dance floor tells me we are definitely already involved.”

“I really do like you, Carmen. I like spendin' time together when we can, but I got responsibilities that have to come first – basketball, homework, job, Ma and my brother. If we got together I'd always be cancelin' out on you and I'd feel bad about that.”

“So, let's have a plain pink dress and red shirt and tie relationship.”

“I don't understand.”

“It worked last night – strictly informal. When we can be together we'll be together. No commitment to 'always' being there for each other. No responsibility except when we can, we will.”

“That still don't sound fair to you 'cuz, like I said, I'm the one who'll have to keep cuttin' out on you.”

“You telling me I have no right to make my own

decisions about who I hang with and how I do my hangin'?"

"Of course not – well maybe. You're confusing me. I got to get to work. By this time on Saturday, lots of the shelves at the grocery store are missin' stock. Mr. Templeton don't like that one little bit. He says if it ain't on a shelf, customers can't buy it."

"You even sounded like him right then."

"I've heard it often enough. I guess I should know how he sounds. Maybe we can talk later."

"Sure. Maybe. We'll see how things go."

Carmen seemed to be serious about that pink dress and red shirt relationship she suggested. Maybe informal *could* work.

At the store, several of the women employees curtsied and congratulated Lamar on his 'kingness'. He tried not to show his embarrassment and got right to work.

He arrived home at about seven. A note on the kitchen table informed him his mother had to work late. He grazed through the refrigerator. They had often had to go without lots of things at his house, but food was seldom one of them. After work, he often brought home produce that was beyond its 'fresh' date. Produce was expensive so that helped with the food budget. That night it was a sack of oranges, celery, and four containers of berries. He knew his mother's blood pressure was high, so he tried to keep celery strips in the fridge.

He had taken Friday evening off for the dance, so his check would be short that week – he got paid on Monday. During basketball season, they were always short between practices and games. The week of the out of town tournament back in December, he didn't bring in a cent. He was just happy Mr. Templeton allowed him to miss work and still keep his job.

"Lamar, can you help me reach the sunflower seeds?"

"Young man, can you point me toward the catsup?"

"I can't find the chili – the kind with the head of a wolf on the red can."

Lamar was happy to be of assistance. Early in life, his mother had helped him see himself as a helper-guy –

whenever somebody needed something he was right there eager to contribute. His mother was that way. He learned about the good feelings that attended it. He wasn't sure what professional field he would eventually choose but figured it would center around helpfulness.

He understood that at the high school and junior college levels he had everything it took to be a star player. He also knew that his size and skills would not support him much beyond that level. It was fine. He enjoyed playing but had set his mind to be ready to move on to something more important by the time he entered his twenties. In the essay he had written to accompany his applications for scholarships, he had characterized his relationship with basketball as the canoe that was carrying him upstream. He wanted to be clear and honest about his intentions. He had ruled out several occupations based on his ability – doctor, lawyer, preacher, mechanic. He thought he'd be a good teacher but wasn't sure he could cut the college course work. He might give it a try, anyway. He loved helping kids.

Soon after his 'birds and bees' talk at eleven, he decided he would never risk becoming a father until he was married. He would never want to send another boy out into the world, who would have to go through his early years without a father. The whole idea of how he had come into the world left him feeling dirty. Initially, he was terribly angry with his mother and worked overtime trying to punish her. A cop on the block really came through for him and over a period of six months set him back on track.

There's an idea, Lamar – become a cop.

MARIA – 3:

"Mama! You shouldn't have let me sleep in," Maria said as she appeared in the kitchen at 9:15. Saturday morning. They were expecting me at 8:00 at the center."

"It is all taken care of. Papa called and explained you had been up late last night taking care of a love-sick teen age friend. You're good 'til 10:00."

"You two are the best."

“Now, sit. Eat. Tell me every last detail about last night.”

Papa, sensing he had served his purpose, excused himself.

Maria held forth for thirty minutes. There were smiles and chuckles and even a few tears – on both their parts. Her mother hung on every word.

“I really have to leave now. Should be home by one. Love you.”

She found herself adding a skip here and there to her usual steady, business-like, gait. Maria took on more than was reasonable both at home and out in the world, so getting places on time consumed some amount of her energy.

At 16, Maria was a novice where it came to love. She could count the number of romantic kisses she had experienced on one hand. None had been as meaningful as the one from Stephen. She wondered why. She had some ideas. It was the pinnacle of an intimate evening – intimate meaning a time between two people who were focused on growing to know and care about each other in important ways. It had been initiated and achieved consensually. It was not, as her other kisses had been, a requirement – a thank you for the whatever. This one had been with a person she had cared about for some time. It was about exploring just how special that relationship might be and might become. She felt sure it had grown to a new and precious level that night. It was wonderful – the kiss, the feelings. It was, also, scary.

To hear her friends talking about their experiences, kissing between boys and girls seemed more like a sport than a meaningful reflection of feelings. It was less about communicating genuine, tender feelings and more about driving up the level of generic passion between the two. Passion was one of several feelings human beings specifically sought – she understood that. Their kiss that night had provided a glimpse into that world. It had been the perfect peek, she thought. It left her wondering what remained. It helped her decide if this was a boy with whom she wanted to explore that expanded relationship. It had answered important questions. It had raised others. All in all, it set her exactly at

the place she believed she needed to be at 16. She had tasted the pie and was content to continue enjoying it one small slice at a time. She also understood many boys weren't. Stephen's feelings about it would be an important part of her appraisal.

* * *

As she neared home, on the short walk from the Center, she saw a strange car in front of her house. It wasn't just a car; it was a BMW. Surely the bank had not come to foreclose on the mortgage or something. She picked up her pace. Her brothers ran to meet her.

"That boy's here."

"See what he's drivin'?"

"You're lucky!"

"He said he'd take us for a ride if you and Papa say it's okay."

'What is Stephen doing with a car like that, she wondered.' The fact he was the heir of one of the richest men in town had not registered with her. It still hadn't as she approached the front steps where Stephen was sitting with her sisters. She allowed the car to become secondary.

"What a nice surprise, Stephen. We didn't make any plans, did we?"

"I'm glad it's a nice surprise. Your brothers and sisters are great kids. They're sort of babysitting me while your mother left for a few minutes to take care of some business."

"So far, he's being a pretty good kid," the oldest brother said.

It drew smiles and chuckles from everybody. Maria took a seat beside him. The others pressed in close.

"Don't you guys have things to do?"

They looked at each other, shook their heads and stayed put.

"This is a great neighborhood, Stephen, but even here, there's no reason to chance leaving a car like that just sitting around."

She was proud how well she had contained her astonishment about the vehicle.

"My Jag is in the shop – wait, that came out sounding

like I'm some sort of a full-of-myself-rich-brat. Now I don't know how to fix it."

As she might have predicted, he began hitting his forehead with the heel of his hand. The kids thought it was foot stomping humorous.

"How about something like, 'That's why I've hired this posse to help me look after it?'"

"I bow to your superior social finesse. THAT, then. What you said."

"I'm really not as cool about it as I may appear," she said. "Frankly, I've never considered what, if any, kind of car you had. You ride the bus, so I had no reason to wonder, I suppose."

"I ride the bus because you do. You surely know who my dad is."

"In a general way, I suppose, but I'm not interested in being your father's girlfriend."

"Oooooo," came the sibling chorus."

"You guys scram. No bleeding until Mama returns. Stephen and I have things to talk about."

"We're willing to listen," the oldest girl offered.

"Scat, I say. Scat. I will invoke the 'go do your homework clause' if you don't."

"*Aguafiestas!*" the eldest girl said, standing and herding the others inside.

"I guess I don't understand, *aguafiestas*. My Espanol is more Espanain't."

She laughed and took his hand in hers.

"Best translation in that case was, *Party Pooper*. May I ask why you came?"

"A guy need a better reason than to come and study the most beautiful eyes he's ever seen?"

"I'd say that might be sufficient."

"What was that about wanting to date my father?"

She slapped him, playfully.

"I guess we haven't really spoken about family much," she said. "You seem to know more about mine than I do about yours."

"That's the real reason I came by driving the decadent

vehicle – so I could honestly lay out things about myself. I don't want there to be either secrets or misunderstandings between us. I want us to be honest about our expectations and things."

"So, really, my beautiful eyes have nothing to do with your presence."

"Honestly. I can't get them out of my head since last night."

"So, *that's* where they've been," she said, feeling the air in front of her as if unable to see.

Stephen shook his head as she continued.

"So, you know how my family has reacted to you when you come here. How would your father react if you took me into his office?"

Stephen broke a smile and shook his head.

"Honestly, he'd probably say: 'Son, you know the maids are only allowed in here overnight'."

He reached out and pulled her close. She wondered what had taken him so long.

JAMES – 3:

James awakened at his usual time – seven o'clock sharp. That didn't mean he got *up* at seven o'clock sharp. That morning, however, he did. It was Saturday. He enjoyed eating breakfast at the hospital cafeteria and that was the only day when everything fell into place, so he could easily get all the way across the city by eight. Mary, a candy stripper came on duty at eight. It wasn't fictitious *Mary* Queen of Scotts or *Mary* Poppins – just plain, real life, *Mary* – they didn't use last names on their tags.

Mary wore her brown hair shoulder length, poofed, or whatever girls called it along the bottom. Sometimes she pulled it back into a pony tail. Her skin was like alabaster – he had come across that description somewhere and looked up what it meant. It fit her to a T. Her teeth sparkled, and she wore little or no makeup – maybe some eyebrow pencil. Her dress was red and white striped – full cut for easy movement, he assumed, and knee length, buttoned down the back. Over

that, she wore a durable looking, full length, white apron with large pockets at her hips and smaller ones across the front. Her tennies were red with white stitching. She was shapely in all the places she needed to be shapely – pretty much the ideal girl of his dreams. He always attempted to strike up a conversation. That was, after all, the point of his two-hour, weekly excursion. She was polite but made no overtures to extend the chats beyond what was necessary.

James was used to being ignored, so did not consider it a signal to cease and desist. One of the best things about Mary was that she had never come right out and told him to buzz off. He wasn't unattractive, himself, especially when wearing clothes that added the appearance of gentle bulk to his slender build. He had a fine smile and his wavy hair, when combed, was several steps above merely acceptable – coal black and full bodied. A girl had once complimented him on his eyelashes – long and dark with a slight, upward curl. He would never forget that and was reminded of it and her every time he looked in a mirror. Mary had no reason to have knowledge of him, so she could not hold his past exploits against him. He knew how to act acceptably – how else could he have so effectively mastered the art of acting unacceptably?

He started through the cafeteria line: eggs, scrambled; bacon, crisp; sausage, patties; potatoes, fried; biscuits, with sausage gravy. He went through the line twice most Saturdays, reserving the later trip for sweet rolls, melon, strawberries, cake, and such. That doubled the number of times Mary would come and take his tray.

He lay out the dishes on his usual table near a window and remained standing while Mary worked her way across the room to pick up his tray. There were never more than a few patrons at that hour.

“My grandmother is doing some better,” he began. “You seem to be the kind of girl who I could share that with.”

“He slid into the chair, pretending weariness.”

“I'm glad. She's been ill for some time, hasn't she?”

Yes! She had been paying attention to him all those weeks.

He nodded looking up at her with a weak smile.

“Her heart. I’m just lucky she has lasted this long.”

“Is there a grandfather?”

James shook his head, solemnly.

“Lost him about this time last year.”

“You seem really close to them.”

“They raised me, you know. Not certain about the future.”

“You in school?”

“Yes. Sophomore. Dickerson High.”

He wasn’t about to reveal the real one.

“I attend Wilson – a Sophomore, too. It’s been nice talking with you, but I’ll lose volunteer points if my supervisor catches me in unnecessary conversation. I’m on track to get my 1,000-hour pin at the end of the school year.”

She added his tray to the several she already had in tow.

“You seem like a really nice boy. I wish you well, you know?”

James smiled into her face, nodding.

“You are very nice, yourself. Thanks for talking. I don’t have many friends.”

He figured he had pressed it as far as he dared that morning. It was the most extended interchange they had ever had. It would provide bed time fantasies for a month. He resisted his urge to call up the colored spotlights and do a production-number-dance routine on and among the tables.

A boy wearing a long coat came to the open door and looked inside. Spotting Mary, he moved directly to her and they chatted confidentially for several moments. She left with him. James doubted if he was her supervisor – too young. Maybe a bother delivering bad news. Maybe her boyfriend. He would be her *brother* if he knew what was good for him.

Upset, James got up and left without eating.

He always made a second stop while at the hospital – the 7th floor hallway that held the big window behind which the new born babies were kept. He had his routine down pat: into the linen closet just around the corner at the end of the hall to don scrubs. He exited, pulling a cart and pushing a dry mop.

By then, the staff was used to seeing him Saturday mornings and he received more than one thumbs up and mouthed, 'Good Mornings', from the nurses behind the glass. He busied himself there for some time.

James was fascinated with babies. He would never want to be party to making one, life being what it was, although he had completed all the proper, very pleasant, practice steps on several occasions. Some girls would do anything for a few bucks or promises. Idiots! He was frustrated that he could not offer the babies advice and alert them to the tribulations life had to offer them. Perhaps, telepathy!

'You have my condolences. Life sucks. You know those smiling nurses that cuddle and rock and lullaby you. Once you're out of here, you'll never cross their minds again.

'At that point they turn you over to fully incompetent parents who had no rational reason for creating you and will soon begin demonstrating not only their incompetence, but also their loathing of you – you, the one who steals their precious time and becomes such an expensive addition to their lives. One or both may even leave you high and dry someday. You may or may not learn to live with it. I'm one of the lucky ones who refuses to learn to live with it. If we had more time I could teach you dozens of ways to get under their skin, while at the same time, guiltling them into continuing to take far better care of you than you deserve. Also, look around. These other kids all seem harmless enough right now, but just wait; they'll soon be doing their vicious social climb-thing right up and over you, casting your scratched and bleeding carcass aside on their way toward position of *Top Jock* or *Brazen Bitch* – words you're too young for me to define for you'. Of course, they won't even know the name your carcass once went by.

He left smiling, and, as usual, seething with anger.

CHAPTER FOUR

AMY – 4:

Amy walked to school early on Monday morning. It was light by seven. Her friend, Sue, lived just a block north – closer to school. With those factors in place, her parents would let her walk – in the light and with a friend. It was five blocks between safe havens. They so disliked having to raise their children in a world of violence and mistrust but arranged the best thin line they could between being overprotective and reasonably protective. Their decisions didn't always meet with their children's approval, but they were always followed.

When first married, they had miscarried with their first pregnancy and Mrs. Adams had not been sure she would ever be willing to try again. With support from her husband and a few sessions with a counselor, she returned to her positive self and a year later, Amy entered their lives, becoming a constant ray of sunshine.

She was full of hugs and kisses and, 'I love you's'. Eventually, she spread those propensities to her younger brothers. She was devastated at Marc's affliction when he was born and yelled at God about it every night for months instead of saying her prayers. Eventually, she must have accepted God's apology – it was what she had been demanding. As far as her parents could tell, things seemed to be okay there, again.

It was in Tommy, however, that Amy found her family soulmate. She talked to him about her problems and wonders when he was still in his crib. They went on wonderful walks

together from the time he could barely repeat three steps without landing on his behind. She'd cheer him back onto his feet and he'd be off once more, often in a direction of his choice rather than hers. She was with him when he said his first word – 'Amy'. She had never revealed that – not even to him. To her, it defined their special bond. It *had* garnered a line in her diary.

She and Sue had agreed to help create a basketball mural for The Oldtimers' Game – the mural on white butcher paper that got joyfully demolished as the screaming, testosterone-hyped, players crashed through it on their way onto the 'field of battle'. Amy's, Grover Cleveland High Wild Cats, would be taking on the cross-town rival, Woodrow Wilson High Bull Dogs – after two teams of middle-aged, middle-sagging, once-upon-a-time-players destroyed themselves in one last, fifteen minute, attempt to recreate moments of teen glory. The creation of said banner is what necessitated their early arrival that morning.

Although she always participated in such school-spirit-based activities with at least a minimum level of enthusiasm and loyalty, Amy's nature was more typically calm, cooperative, and nonviolent (once she and God had reached their understanding!). She had balked, initially, at submitting her paintings to contests where there were winners and losers. Everybody had the right to assign beauty to whatever they wanted. Some might see hers as most beautiful and some might see Sue's or Zane's that way. The idea that there could be only one 'most beautiful' piece aggravated her no end. Tommy had posed one of his ever-wise questions to her: "So, would you rather not enter so none of your pictures can ever bring joy to anybody, or are you going to just go ahead and put them out there so whoever enjoys one of them can enjoy it?"

Even through its eight-year-old awkwardness, Amy had gotten the point.

From then on, she let them be entered. As her continuing statement of disapproval, however, she tossed aside the medals and ribbons. Tommy collected them in a small, lockbox, hoping someday they might provide happy

memories for her.

That afternoon in American History, Amy raised the question as to why the terrible treatment of the Indigenous American Tribes was not given so much as one sentence in their text book. The teacher was clearly fascinated – pleased – by the supportive chorus of indignation about the omission, once Amy and a few others explained the facts behind the question.

“How would it be if we set aside the first two weeks of March to take an in-depth look at both the lore and wisdom of the Native American Tribes across the Nation, and, also, their treatment by the United States government and the factors that fostered it? Looking out across your faces, my guess is that many of you have significant Native American ancestry. I'd like you to each begin looking into that – your own ancestors as possible victims.”

A boy – usually quiet and studious – raised his hand.

“Won't that interfere with the topics we will be tested on by the state at the end of the year?”

“I *certainly* hope so,” the teacher said laying the book down heavily on his desk. “How about if you and I make cheat sheets for all the students about the topic that will be tested – ‘*Giants of the Industrial Revolution*’. My bet is that you and I can cover the topic every bit as well in two days as this dreary old text book does in four, dismal chapters. You on board?”

The boy shrugged. He broke a smile.

“Sure, I guess, if you think I can do it.”

At the Adams' home, that evening, they were all present at the supper table – a rare and coveted occasion.

“So, what earthshaking effects did ‘mother's and my little brood’ have on the world today?”

There were immediately three enthusiastic monologues.

In addition to Amy having revised the curriculum for Senior American History, it seemed Marc had finished a computer-based system for coach, that would keep track in real time of play patterns the opposing basketball team used in various, common situations. Tommy's story about the dinosaur and the principal had been given rave reviews by his

classmates. His teacher invited Mr. Coffelt, the principal, to sit in on the premier reading of the story. The squat little, balding man arrived wearing a Fred Flintstone outfit and carrying a huge club. The fourth graders all but wet their pants over that. (Will not swear some didn't!) They were fortunate to have a man such as he in their lives.

Tommy and his dad served dessert – strawberry cake and ice cream.

“Here’s something we haven’t done in a while,” Mrs. Adams said reaching across to the counter to fetch a small honey pot that sat there. Inside, were slips of paper, each holding a family member’s name.

“*Good Stuff*”, Marc said. “I love that game. We should require it at least once a week.

As the honey pot was passed from person to person each drew a name. Their task was to tell something they really liked about that person or relate something that person had done for them recently that they appreciated.

Supper had been fine.

Dessert had been great.

And *Good Stuff* had been pure enjoyment spread with love.

JUSTIN – 4:

It was past the time her son was usually asleep, even on Saturdays. She passed his door on the way to her room and noted his light was off – darkness beneath his door. She sighed that parental sigh of relief and began to enjoy a smile – the most precious thing in her life was safe and sound, renewing himself for another important day. What was that? Her smile acquired the look of puzzlement. She paused and leaned closer to the door. He was sobbing.

Did she intrude or leave him to work it out on his on – regularly, a thoughtful parent’s genuine concern.

She knocked lightly and spoke quietly.

“Justin. Is there anything I can do?”

“I’ll be fine, Ma. Just a dumb teen boy thing.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. You’re supposed to know that.”

(Apparently, she did, Justin!)

His remark had not entirely been intended as humorous.

She opened the door and entered. Justin pulled a sheet up around him and scooted back against the headboard.

“No light, please,” he said.

He patted the bed for her to sit. He managed a faint smile, lost, of course, in the darkness.

“Like old times when you’d come to assure me there were no goblins or trolls under my bed, massing for an attack at the stroke of midnight.”

“I think I had a pretty good record against them, didn’t I?”

“Perfect, as I recall.”

“So, I’m thinking this isn’t about monsters, tonight?” she said. “Girls?”

“I’m a teenage boy, mom. There are *always* problems about girls, but that’s not it tonight.”

He grew silent, collecting his thoughts. He needed to say it and still he needed to spare his mother’s feelings. Justin was usually pretty good with words.

“Lately, I’ve become really angry, again, about not having a dad. I know it’s irrational so let’s not go there. I probably even know it’s not all that abnormal for a kid in my position. But I’m telling you, anger, irrational or not, can really hurt – eat away at guy’s guts deep inside!”

She knew when to remain quiet.

“I know he didn’t go off and die in order to hurt me. I even know that when he weighed the risks of the tour he had excellent reasons to believe he’d be safe. I even remember you saying part of why he went was to be a model for me about how men need to be helpful and selfless, trying to build a better world. Regardless of those things, I get so mad at him sometimes I think my head will split apart. Like right now, I’d like to be running through the alleys, screaming all the obscene words I know at him.”

“And probably some you’d make up on the spot,” his

mother offered, reaching out to pat his arm.”

“And I got a list of great ones saved up over the years, you can bet on that, Ma.”

She nodded her head.

“So do I.”

“What? . . . Ma . . .? You . . .? You get angry, too?”

She raised her eyebrows, leaned her head to one side, and nodded.

“Want to hear one of my favorite epithets?”

“I don’t know,” he came back, suddenly unsure about the direction the conversation seemed to be taking.

She leaned toward him and he toward her, if a bit reluctantly. She whispered in his ear.

“Mom! That is horrible!”

“Think you can top it?”

He thought for a moment and then offered his opening volley, also whispered.

“Justin Nathaniel – I should wash your mouth out with soap.”

“That’s nowhere near the worst one I got. Give me one more of yours, then I’ll share my biggest gun.”

“Alright. How about this?”

“Mom! I’d have never believed it in my whole life. . . You win. That’s worse by five levels of magnitude over mine. I had no idea. I should have, of course. I’ve been so selfishly tied up in my own needs – and anger, I suppose – that I’ve never even considered your side of it. I’m sorry for that.”

“It is not the child’s place to care for his parent – not for another forty years or so, at least. We’re still on for that, right?”

Justin broke a needed grin and nodded.

“Of course.”

It allowed a short pause. He continued

“May I ask you one question, mom?”

“Of course.”

“Do you make it a habit of listening at my door to see if I’m bawling my eyes out at night?”

“No. When you become a parent you’ll understand about *‘protective snooping’* – your father coined the term and I

believe it is perfect in every way. It means always knowing what you need to know in order to be sure your child is safe and doing well, but never prying any further than that – always respecting his privacy.”

“Wow. You and dad thought about stuff like that? I just figured it was your job to feed me, clothe me, and keep me well and safe – like, all the other stuff just sort of happened – fell in place. Thanks, you know. *Wow*. I guess I said that. Suddenly the idea of becoming a parent is downright scary – more like terrifying. I don’t know what to say.”

“How about just agreeing *not* to become *one* until you’re comfortably settled into your own marriage?”

“I can agree to that. Speaking of that – and I’m changing the topic – you did an outstanding job of protective snooping, tonight. Thanks.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then continued.

“And, speaking of **that**, *comfortably settled into your own marriage*, when are you going to get your (teen boy vocabulary check, here) . . . *behind* . . . in gear and find a husband? At this rate I’ll be out of high school and making license plates at the State Pen before you get on with your life. I want to have a shot at helping train him up just right for you.”

“You dear, sweet, ever-unpredictable boy. Would it surprise you if I said I am already interested in in a man my age?”

“You mean Gerald from work, of course.”

“What? How? You scamp!”

Justin put his hands up in front of his face, feigning defensive maneuvers.

“Here’s the way it is with sons, mom. Early in life we develop this thing we refer to as ‘Protective Snooping’ – obtaining all we need to know about our mom’s private life to make sure she’s okay, but never pressing it beyond that.”

“You *are* a scamp, but the most loveable scamp God ever breathed life into. I love you so much.”

Playfully, he pushed away from her.

“Okay. Okay. This is a seventeen-year-old male you’re talking with, Ma’am. We don’t cotton to all this blubbing, lovey, dovey, stuff.”

“Tough luck, then, because you should not count on it stopping any time soon. *Protective Snooping!* Turning the tables. I declare. You are one of a kind.”

“That, ‘one of a kind’ that only you and dad could create – part imp and part scalawag – you’ll need to figure which came from whom.”

They each slept remarkably well that night.

LAMAR – 4:

He had agreed to cover a friend’s shift Sunday Morning, so he could be the best man at another employee’s wedding. The store was on a busy boulevard – most stops were of the red sign variety sitting at the corners of the side streets. He walked *to* work and ran home *from* work – a sweat related thing.

He saw the problem before it unfolded. A city bus, stopped to let off passengers at a bus stop, closed its doors and pulled out into traffic. A car was poised, ready to cross the boulevard in Lamar’s direction as soon as the bus had cleared the street. Problem. An old man with a walker, who had just exited the bus, started across that side street hidden from view by the bus. The impatient driver was speeding across the boulevard long before he could see the man. Tires screeched. Rubber smoked.

Lamar had entered the cross street just as the bus was pulling away. On the run, he snatched up the old man and carried him to safety. The skidding car hit the curb and flipped onto its side, its gas tank punctured. He sat the man on the bench at the bus stop, called a nearby woman’s attention to him, and headed back to the car.

“Somebody call 911,” he called back to the crowd.

The driver was at least unconscious. His face was covered with blood. His door, although facing *up* as the vehicle had come to rest on its right side, was jammed shut. Another driver was soon by Lamar’s side offering a lug wrench. He handed it to the taller Lamar who had already sized up the situation. Since the driver’s head was resting against the front, side window, that one could not be broken.

He went to work on the one toward the rear.

“Make sure there’s nobody smoking near all this gas,” Lamar said to the lug wrench man.

He moved out to spread the word and kept the crowd back. Both were concerned that the end of the hot tailpipe was resting dangerously near a growing puddle of gasoline.

With the rear window demolished, Lamar reached in, not at all sure what his next move should be. Whatever it would be, he needed to get the man back toward the center of the front seat to make room to work on the door. He pushed and moved the man easily. He reached for the electronic door release on the inside of the door then stopped; it might cause a spark. He proceeded to break out the front, side window from the inside, so the man would not be cut. He lay a flat pillow from the back seat over the bottom of the opening, to protect from the shards of glass still wedged into the frame. A second man came to offer help.

“He’s a slight dude,” Lamar said. “If we can keep this pillow in place we can pull him across it through the window. Under his arm pits. You take that side. Ready? Pull!”

Lamar had been correct. The man weighed very little – mostly because it was a boy no older than eleven or twelve. Once out, Lamar carried the unconscious lad to safety some thirty feet away. The distant sirens signaled help would soon arrive. He lay the boy down on his back on the sidewalk and checked his pulse and breathing rate – who knew his first aid class would actually come in handy. His vitals seemed okay. There was something about raising a person’s feet – “Yes, shock”.

“Kid,” Lamar said, pointing to a Jr high age boy in the gathering.

“Here. On the ground. Hands and knees. We need to keep his feet raised until real help arrives. Make like a foot stool.”

“I’d say *you’re* real help, Lamar. Sure. Show me where you want me.”

That done, he stood up and looked around surveying the situation. A firetruck pulled in and soon foam engulfed the car and the gasoline on the pavement. A police car arrived.

The officer approached the growing crowd – by then eighteen or so.”

“Anybody in charge here?”

As one, they turned and pointed.

“Lamar!”

The officer approached him, breaking a smile.

“Ah, yes, the Basketball Lamar from Grover Cleveland High.”

He offered his hand.

Lamar ignored it and began his explanation before the officer could genuflect, kiss his ring or ask his first question.

“The boy here was the driver – the only occupant. A cut across his forehead explains all the blood – a forehead bleeds like a stuck pig. It’s why I didn’t recognize he was just a kid at first. Need to get his vitals, but they seemed okay a few minutes ago. The old man on the bench, there, was about to be hit by the car. I’m afraid I may have been a bit rough on him when I grabbed him and pulled him up out of the way. I sure hope I didn’t hurt him. The lady there has been with him. She can fill you in on how he’s doing. He was using an aluminum walker. I imagine it’s smashed beyond recognition. He appears to be poor, so we’ll need to find some way of replacing it for him – right away.”

“You did great, son. We’ll let the EMTs take over now.”

“What else do you need from me? I’m late for work at *Templeton’s Grocery* across the street.”

He pointed as if needing to verify the truth of his statement.

“I’ll find you later and get a full statement. Thanks again for your quick thinking.”

“You need my address at least, right – or phone number?”

“Son, I’m a cop. If I can’t track down the best B Ball player in the city, then I’m not worthy of wearing this badge. You sure *you’re* ok to go to work. I’ll just bet I can get you a pass.”

“Thanks, but I really need the money – it’s an extra shift on a skimpy paycheck.”

“I understand about that. I’ve never shopped at

Templeton's. The merchandise any good?"

Lamar offered his full grin and lowered his tone, bending down and speaking out of the corner of his mouth.

"Let's just say, I can direct you down the aisles you *want* to pick from, and I can direct you down the aisles you *don't* want to pick from."

"Great to meet you, Lamar. I'll find you later."

The kids in the crowd waved and 'good-byed' him on his way. A few reached out to touch him – just so they could say they had. He hated how his presence had turned the focus on him instead of on the victims. In fact, it made him mad. He muttered himself across the street.

"Some people's priorities is all screwed up, that's all I can say – really, really screwed up!"

"You're late, Lamar. That's not like you."

"Sorry, Mr. Templeton. I'll try not to let it happen again."

MARIA – 4

Early Sunday morning, the seven members of the Alvarez family single-filed into St. Valencia's Church – up the eight cement steps in front, a left turn across the rear of the sanctuary, a right past three pews along the far wall, and then the final right turn and the scramble to find a spot for each precious little behind on the family pew. Maria, bringing up the rear, did what she could to resurrect some sense of dignity as two dozen sets of prying eyes turned to watch.

'Brothers,' she thought, perhaps with less of a pure heart than should have been present considering the day, the place, the service. Presently, they each had their spot staked out – protected by elbows poised to fly. As was his custom, Papa handed out pieces of hard candy to the children – one per waiting mouth – like a robin feeding its brood. They knew the instructions: do not bite it; let it melt in your mouth; do not remove it unless you're choking; it should last exactly twenty minutes – the very length of Father's abbreviated, early service, hence Papa's reason for choosing it.

* * *

“Amen.”

The family stood and, with but the faintest sense of decorum, retraced their path from earlier. Outside, at the bottom of the steps, they stopped and looked to their father. He counted to make sure nobody had gotten lost or wandered off, then threw up his hands, the signal they were on their own until they got home.

“I don’t know how you do it,” the priest said, gently placing his hand on Mama’s shoulder.”

“*Los niños?*” she asked. (“The kids?”)

“*No. ¿Cómo has aguantado a este anciano todos estos años.*” (“No. How you’ve put up with this old man all these years.”)

They shared a chuckle (apparently, pretty much the same in both languages.)

Maria helped put breakfast on the table. Sunday morning was the time each family member told about something he or she hoped to accomplish during the coming week: ‘get all my spelling words right,’ ‘beat William in a race from the fence to the school door,’ ‘not lose my underpants,’ ‘get up the courage to ask my boss for a raise,’ ‘make a wonderful piñata for Mateo’s friend, Santiago’s, birthday party’. There were a few others. Maria kept hers to herself since nobody would really understand – finish the essay for Sociology.

It was the boys turn to do dishes – an event best witnessed in a wet suit from across the street, behind the fence, under an umbrella. While Papa got them organized the women hurried away, snickering. Papa gave the final reminder: “For every broken dish, you lose one dessert this week. *Listo? Ir!* (Ready? Go!)

Upstairs, in the room Maria shared with her just younger sister, she sat back on her bed with her tablet and began thinking through the main points she wanted to make in her essay: Considering how inter-racial marriage will affect your children – *before* you conceive them (*or, maybe, Can you be unselfish enough to consider your future children’s needs alongside your own?*)

Her teacher had loved the idea and approved it with

enthusiasm, even using it as an example to the class of the kind of thoughtfulness she expected to see in all their papers.

Quiet, retiring, Maria had been referred to by her Freshman English teacher as a '*closet wit*'. She often wrote simply hilarious pieces, so unlike her day-to-day self, that the teacher had taken steps to make sure it had been Maria's work. In that vein, Maria began writing.

I was born at a young age of mixed parentage – one male and one female.

It was only a first draft and was not due for two weeks, but Maria's life demanded good – scratch that – *excellent* organization.

Her phone rang – well, barked out the theme from the Big Bang Theory, actually. She chuckled every time she heard it. It was Stephen. Was he becoming intrusive? She had no idea because her interaction with anybody she could characterize as close friends was quite limited.

"Hey, Stevie."

"Stevie? I like it. Always been called, Stephen. Let's see, how can I cute'n up your name – *Mare* – no, I best keep looking I'm thinking. Why am I calling, you were about to ask? It is a good three hours before dinner – or lunch or whatever you call it at your house. Since, promptly at three this afternoon, I will come by to take you somewhere for some sort of luscious dessert, I felt the need to provide this forewarning, so you would save room for said luscious dessert."

"Wow! You know how to sweep a girl off her feet – a private dance soiree, a corsage, a wonderful kiss and now a luscious dessert – all within 48 hours." She put the back of her wrist to her forehead. "I must sit, kind sir, or I will surely swain from the vapors."

He missed the performance, of course.

"If you say so. It was a *wonderful* kiss? Really? I mean I thought it was, but I have no useful experience in that area. My butler, Willoughby, refused to give me lessons."

"His loss, for sure."

"I really like you Maria Alvarez and someday I promise to learn the four names that come in between those two."

"Perhaps we can take them one at a time and maybe I

can figure out some special reward every time you get one right.”

“So, who are you, really?” he asked.

Maria didn’t understand.

“What? Who?”

“In class and around campus you are so quite – you hardly ever look up and I’ve never seen you start a conversation with anybody.”

“You’ve been stalking me?”

“No. Be quiet. I’m not finished. I was about to contrast that with how you seem to be at home or when it is just the two of us together. Like I asked, which one is it?”

“Actually, you asked, ‘who are you,’ but I’ll give you a pass this time.”

Stephen shrugged, not necessarily an effective form of communication over the phone. Maria continued.

“I guess my most honest answer is that when I’m in the halls I’m like I am when I’m in the halls and when I’m with you, I’m like I am when I’m with you.”

“It is no answer, *Maria la cucaracha whoever whatever Alvarez*, but if it’s the best you have right now, I’ll accept that. What are you doing?”

“Talking to you on the phone, silly.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Beginning my Sociology paper.”

“What’s it about.”

“It’s about a mixed-race couple’s responsibilities to their as yet to be conceived children. Prior to marriage, I’m really meaning.”

“So, are you for it or against it?”

“For or against what – being responsible human beings?”

“I may have missed the point upon hearing the topic the first time around.”

“Not a problem. Have you ever thought about it?”

“I’ll not deny I’ve been thinking about mixed-thingy marriage the past few days.”

“Probably that new, math whizz transfer from Taiwan, huh?”

“You lose. Three losses and you’ll have to pay up.”

“Pay up?”

“Agree to dessert. I figure one luscious dessert might be worth one more kiss – trying to make a case for why it would be the right thing for you to do.”

“I’m not sure I can untwist that, but nothing you can ever *do* will buy you my kiss. It’s all about who you *are* that has full control over that.”

“Is it too soon for me to tell you I love you?”

“Of course, it is too soon, doofus. You at least need to be able to remember my whole name!”

JAMES – 4:

His father may or may not have come home on Saturday night. It didn’t matter. James was up and gone by six. One Sunday a month he went to St. Paul’s Catholic Church a few blocks away where he perched himself on the front pew as the head Father guy did his private religious thing before anyone else arrived – he crossed himself, knelt, put his palms together in front of his face, looked up at the horrifying form with the nails through its wrists, and began praying (his lips moved. James felt some kinship there. His lips always moved when he read – he’d never actually tried praying so didn’t venture a guess about how that might have turned out.). It went on for fifteen minutes during which James stretched out, arms behind his head, becoming a comfortable spectator. He figured the Father guy had known he was there from the start.

The man was still kneeling.

“You want to join me here, son?”

“God, no, oh, excuse – no, wait, that’s okay to say in here, right?”

“I won’t pretend to have followed that. So . . .?”

“So, what. Oh, me, there. No, but thanks, I guess. I’ll plead weak knees or an enlarged duodenum or something. I suppose you could join me here on the bench.”

With some obvious effort, the big man stood and turned facing James. It was the first time during their six month

'relationship' they had looked into one another's faces.

"A fine-looking boy – you about 13, 14?"

"Fifteen, but who's counting? You're not such a bad looking guy yourself – 50, 60?"

"Thirty-nine, but who's counting?"

It was reason for a quick smile between them. The priest took a seat several yards down the seat, his arm straightened along the top of the pew. He shifted his body slightly toward James.

"Have you come for spiritual guidance?"

"No. I'm not into either spiritual or guidance – no offense. I do have an observation, though."

"And that is . . .?"

"That whatever you do here every Sunday morning doesn't seem to be working since you have to just keep doing it over and over and over."

The priest chuckled.

"I didn't know you guys were allowed to laugh."

"I'll tell you a secret." He led his head toward James. "Two Sundays ago, I laughed *three* times – shhhh. That must stay just between us."

He looked around, humorously, as if to make sure his remark had not been overheard.

James' quick smile faded rapidly.

"There really isn't any 'us', Padre. I'm quite sure I don't understand you and *nobody* gives a damn whether I wake up mornings or not. I need to be going."

"May I ask why you keep coming back?"

"Mostly, to see if that black robe is going to split up the back when you kneel. You're more than a little chubby, you know. Isn't that a sin, or something – eating food that starving kids need, instead?"

"You have some tough questions rolling around inside that handsome head of yours."

James scooted away – several feet further.

"I've heard stories about you guys and boys."

"I'm sorry about that. I assure you I have no such intentions."

"What *are* your intentions, then?"

“Save your soul if it hasn’t been already.”

“Too late. The Devil claimed it while I was still inside my mother. She, might, in fact, be the Devil, or his bride, or mother. What else you got?”

“I often talk with folks about their problems.”

“That must not get you anyplace.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’d think you should be talking about solutions not problems. You’re like all adults.”

“And how are all adults?”

“Surely an adult that works with adults knows how adults are. Geesh! About as helpful to me as those poor babies in the nursery. If the world was fair, every last one of them should be drown at birth – be the best service grown-ups could provide for us.”

“Us?”

“*Them*. The babies. Youngsters. Can’t you even keep up with what I’m saying? I hope they don’t pay you much. From what I can see, you’re pretty worthless.”

“I’m sorry.”

James smiled.

“What?” the man asked returning the smile.

“You said you were *sorry* – just the point I’ve been trying to make – all adults are sorry – sorry excuses for . . . people – parents, for sure.”

“That must be a very unhappy way to have to live – believing the worst of others.”

“No. Actually, I recently came to that conclusion with absolutely no reservations about it, and life has become far easier. Never count on anybody and you can never be hurt by anybody.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course, you don’t. At least you’re honest about it – I’ll give you that. I suppose that puts you one notch above the rest. I gotta go, but I’ll give you one piece of advice: We been talking here for five minutes and never once have you said anything nice about me – the person, not my face, like you did. Don’t you understand how much guys need to hear that kind of stuff?”

A crack in the bottom-line purpose for his visits?

James stood and began walking up the aisle toward the back of the church. The priest turned in the pew and called after him in a gentle voice.

“Thank you for the advice – my weight, starving kids, compliments. I will take each one to heart.”

James stopped and turned toward the man.

“It’s too bad somebody trapped you into becoming a priest. I think with a little coaching, you could make a boy an acceptable dad.”

Apparently, the inquisition had been more personally relevant than it appeared. Regardless, the boy had expeditiously selected a safe target. He left the church and wound a circuitous route, so he couldn’t be followed.

James prided himself in his honesty – the three card playing buddies and E.R. didn’t really count since their existence or non-existence didn’t harm anybody.

Hungry, he returned home to assess the culinary possibilities. There were none – well not directly. There was a note and three twenties on the table. His father had gone to see his latest female acquaintance. “Have a great Sunday, son,” his full and complete attempt at being a good parent.

James slipped the bills into his front jean’s pocket and secured the note to the wooden table by running it through with a butcher knife.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMY – 5:

Tuesdays were Amy's least favorite day of the week. Mondays were filled with anticipation about what the week would be offering her. On Fridays, everything would come together – things, which earlier in the week, had not existed. Wednesday represented the day she began to feel confident in the work she was doing, and Thursday catapulted that toward Friday's finished project. But Tuesday! Everything depended on Tuesday – establish a schedule, select the best topics, organize things just right, follow the research into the dustiest reaches of the library stacks (and/or the deepest, darkest regions of Google) and make sure she knew exactly where she was headed.

Tommy, on the other hand, *lived* for Tuesdays. He loved organizing and fitting scraps of this and that together, breathing life into some brand new whatever it might become. For him, it was the follow through that was stressful. If you already had the information, why sweat the presentation?

So, with Tommy's enthusiasm about Tuesdays, and Amy's willingness to drag him through the rest of the week, they made a pretty effective team. Marc was an island unto himself – plan, plod, plod, plod, produce! His ups and downs varied but slightly from day to day. Sometimes he did feel a tinge of jealousy about how close his brother and sister were but decided that just gave him the opportunity to develop his independent side.

So, by suppertime on Tuesday, Amy was a mess, Tommy thought school was wonderful, and Marc had carved out a chunk of free time, so he could watch a favorite TV show. Their parents were pleased about the three unique youngsters who were each thriving in their home. Three contributors to a complex jigsaw puzzle, which, when completed once again every Friday evening, revealed the most reassuring picture parents could imagine.

“But I had my eye on that slice of cake all during supper.”

“I don’t care. I got to it first.”

“Like pigs, you little rug rats. I never get first choice because I eat like a lady.”

“So, what does that tell you?”

“Daddy?”

“Mother?”

“Dear God!”

. . . And then, at other times . . .

* * *

Of the three, Amy was the freest with compliments. Tommy had pointed out to her that she often went overboard. “The most believable compliments are the ones that get in and out with the fewest words in the shortest amount of time. When you say too much, everybody thinks you’re exaggerating. They don’t take it seriously.”

“Example, please.”

“Okay. Take your new hairdo. I could say, ‘The ponytail really emphasizes your pretty neck and pulling your hair back away from your face like that reveals your pretty ears and the great ear rings you have.’ Or, much better, I could just give a thumbs up and say, ‘Love your choice of hairdo, today’. See how the second is in and out, short and sweet, no lingering wonders about whether you meant it or not, or why you had to say so much to substantiate your point. You’re welcome.”

“From that perspective, I suppose it might seem I go overboard. In and out, simple and fast. Thanks, brother Thomas. Where do you learn this stuff? Sometimes you come off like a wise old man.”

"I'm convinced that either I was a sage in my former life or some of mom's lectures to me have made an impression."

She reached out and ruffled his hair.

"You know, you're the only person on Earth I let do that – mess with my hair."

"I do."

"Can I mess with yours?"

"Not on your life."

They shared grins.

"We got a good thing don't we, Sis," he said.

"Always have."

"And always will, huh?"

"Always will."

"Did you know Marc and I figured out a way so he can get into and out of the bathtub by himself?"

"No. That's great."

"I guess. It's like he doesn't need me as much anymore. It's why I'm here bugging you. He's in the tub."

"I just bet you'll find ways of filling up the extra time."

"That's what Marc said."

"You've talked it over with him, then?"

"Sure. We talk boy stuff all the time. He said he felt the same way once I left diapers behind – no pun intended – and entered the big boy, pull-up, shorts phase of my life."

"This has been great, but you need to scat now. I'm expecting a call."

"From your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"I hope he treats you good."

"You know he does or I wouldn't stay with him."

"I suppose. You did have the good sense to choose me as your favorite brother."

He scampered out of her room, fully understanding the awkward position in which he had managed to leave her.

Sometimes brothers were helpful. Sometimes they were imps – both seemed to play important roles in learning the ropes of getting along with others.

Her phone rang. The mere fact of seeing his number come up made her feel special. But it wasn't *his* number. It

was Tommy's.

"Tommy, you conniving, despicable, ungrateful little urchin. Get off my line this instant!"

His father walked by Tommy's open door.

"I don't know why you and your sister go to all the trouble of calling each other – it seems clear she can contact you without even touching her phone. What have you done, now?"

"I am on a mission to make certain she never forgets she was *my* girl first and *his* second – or by now I suppose tenth or twelfth."

"And how is your plan working?"

"Great! Didn't you just hear that?"

"I expect you to treat your sister with respect, but I must admit, timing your call that way was a streak of genius. I'll take the phone until Wednesday morning."

"Okay. It was worth it, though."

"Make that *Thursday* morning unless you want to try for *Monday*."

"Suddenly, Thursday sounds like perfect timing. Thank you for meaningful lesson in respect for elder sister, oh, revered elder of the Adams' clan."

"She's right, you know. You *are* an urchin – the most loveable urchin I've run across, but a full-blown urchin without any doubt."

"So, then, most loveable urchin inquires again about the phone?"

"Rapidly going on Friday, son."

"Game over. I quit. Love you. I'm going to check on Marc and make sure he didn't drown in the bathtub. I suppose if he did that'll extend the no phone deal for at least another week?"

His father playfully swatted at his behind. He laughed himself into the bathroom.

JUSTIN – 5:

Justin entered the kitchen for breakfast. He planted a peck on his mother's forehead.

“Do you remember when you were a little boy and we’d go through this same routine, except you’d have to climb up on a chair to reach my cheek?”

“I do, and now I have to bend down just to meet your forehead. Thanks for last night. I want to say I feel closer to you than before, but *closer* doesn’t seem like the right term.”

“How about more your mother’s equal – the maturity thing?”

“Maybe. It could be. I’ll get back to you. One thing, did you really call my father a . . .”

She slapped her hand over his mouth.

“You watch your language in this kitchen, young man, there’s a lady present.”

It was worth grins and a long-held glance between them.

“I wanted you to know I really do feel better. It’s not over, but I feel better. Would you mind if I visited the psychologist at school to talk it out with a third party?”

“In fact, that would be my suggestion. I am so proud of you.”

“For my creative use of the English language last evening?”

“Well, *that*, of course, but for your good sense – just the whole package you are presenting to the world.”

“Perhaps we should leave any discussion of your son’s package out of our mother/son conversations.”

He received a playful slap across his mouth.

“Too, far, huh?”

She nodded, leaving no doubt about her position on the matter.

“Sorry. It feels like there are new, different boundaries for us this morning and I have no idea what they are.”

“I suggest we return to the old ones and ease out into new ones as it feels comfortable.”

“Agreed. And, *relieved*, actually. What can I do to help, here?”

“Plates and utensils will help. You coffeeing or not this morning?”

“Now *that* you didn’t find out about by protective

snooping at my bedroom door.”

“I must admit that came my way from an uninvited little busy birdy. I have no problem with you drinking coffee. Now, anything much stronger and we *will have* a problem.”

“I already promised, not until I’m of legal age. You trust me on that, right?”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Saying what concerns me in my heart often doesn’t correlate really well with what I know in my head. I trust you as much as anybody in my life.”

“Let’s let that be our secret, mom – if it became widely known that I was trustworthy, people might expect me to become responsible – a responsible teenage boy? Come now!”

“I can point to like a billion fathers of teen age girls who would welcome it.”

He fluttered his eyebrows. Neither of them really knew what it meant. More than likely just putting off the testing of new boundaries a bit longer.

They began eating – pancakes, sausage and – drumroll – coffee. Not a nutritionist’s menu, but it was what they liked.

“You raise an interesting point,” Justin said. “If I managed to come across as trustworthy and responsible to both girls and their fathers, I just might have to beat them off with a . . . whatever one beats girls off with.”

“I’m serious here,” his mother said. “How would the other guys feel about you if that happened?”

“Interesting question. Since teen boys lie as much as we – well, *they* – tell the truth, such a situation might upset the balance of male-teendom. I’ll get back to you and I’m serious, too.”

“In light of all that, there is one question I’d like to ask but know I have no right to,” she said.

“Do I lie to the other guys about what I do with girls? Is that it?”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“You want my answer or not?”

Without answering she put down her coffee and looked across the table at him.

“Yes. I’ve told some tall tales but, and this is the

important part, I never have and never will say anything that would tarnish a girl's reputation. That would tarnish mine as well – at least in my eyes. I want to be one of the guys, but I've never had trouble being one and sticking very close to the truth about those things. For a guy my age there's hardly anything more important than being one of the guys, having close friends, but if I had to hurt anybody to keep any of that, I'd walk away. Like you have said, my responsibility to the world is more important than being accepted by a few bastards – wait, no *that* wasn't your word. What was your word?"

"*Misguided Jerks*, if you'll allow me *two*."

"You want to hear the big gun those MJ's bring up to support their claim that I should go out and get . . . have sex?"

He didn't wait, thinking she would not say, yes.

"They say, what if I got hit by a car or something tomorrow and died, then I'd have never known how it was to have sex. Jerks! If I was dead I sure wouldn't know I'd missed something. I like most of the guys I hang with, but there are a few that are dumb as soup when it comes to separating the really important stuff from the just plain dumb stuff. End of sermon, I guess."

"I think you delivered it to the wrong congregation, son."

"Oh, I've said those things to them before. They all know where I stand on the topics. But, you know what happens to rain drops on the hood of a freshly waxed car?"

She understood. Early on, she had assumed her husband was the one who would have been having the sorts of conversations she and Justin had fallen into during those past twelve hours. Having never been a teenage boy, how could she know the right things to say? She had been taken by at least two things: her son's openness in his discussions with her – she took that as a sign he trusted her – and the extremely good sense he exhibited. Either he came by that genetically, or she had reason to believe she had influenced him in helpful and positive ways. She was @\$&%ed if she'd let *that* be attributed to genes. She had worked hard and, clearly, she had just experienced some of the reward for her seventeen years of effort.

LAMAR – 5:

That morning, Lamar had a light practice from 6:30 to 7:30. It was a game day. Practice went well. The shower felt especially good. His rescue mission had strained his upper left arm, something he had been able to keep to himself. Day by day it improved. He figured it would be at least 90% by game time.

Carmen was waiting for him in the hall.

“Hey? I hear that I have a certified hero on my arm this morning.”

“Ya hear wrong. Nothin’ nobody else couldn’t of done if they’d have been where I was when it all come down.”

“That’s not how the article in the paper tells it. Quotes interviews with a dozen people who witnessed it all.”

She offered him her copy.

“I don’t want to see it. I just want to get back to my old routine. I can’t take two steps but somebody’s in my face about bein’ a hero. They ask questions. I don’t want to talk about it. I hate it. Please understand and help me.”

“Of course. If you’re serious, I have an idea. Come with me to the nurse’s room.”

“Hanky Panky this early in the day?”

“Hanky Panky? Has that even been uttered out loud during the past fifty years? Of course not. Trust me on this.”

They entered, and she had a hushed conversation with the nurse. They then turned back to him.

“Lamar, this my Aunt, also Carmen.”

“Have a seat here, Lamar,” Nurse Carmen said.

She pretended to examine his cheeks, chin and jaw.

“I must say it’s one of worst cases I’ve ever seen – *Tendon Jaw*. Only good cure is to truss up that jaw tight and keep it closed for the rest of the day. Won’t be able to talk to anybody.”

“But the game, tonight, at Rockport.”

“When’s tip off?”

“Seven o’clock, like usual.”

“Interesting. The medical books say by seven you must take off the wrapping. Depending on how you feel about things

in the morning, we can repeat the treatment or not.”

Lamar broke a smile.

“I’m slow on the pickup sometimes, but I see your scheme. I can’t answer nobody’s questions while my jaw’s immobilized – learned that term in first aide. I’m down with it. What about coach?”

“I’ll handle coach,” the nurse said. “When’s your lunch hour?”

“Four and a half hour.”

“You come back here. Carmen will bring your tray. Then rinse and repeat for the afternoon.”

“Thank you. Let’s get on with the mummy face. I’ll need a medical note to carry from class to class.”

She nodded. Five minutes later they were back in the hall. Carmen joyfully spread the story.

“Tendon Jaw, obtained when he hit it on something during the rescue. Don’t talk to him, now. We need it to be better by game time.”

By the beginning of Home Room, there was not a soul in the building that hadn’t heard. The teachers who knew the boy best, had their suspicions, but would never blow his cover.

Period four and a half.

“This may have been the best morning at school in my whole life, Carmen. Nobody tried to high five me for fear of shaking something loose, I suppose. No dumb questions like, ‘how many three pointers tonight, King’. You must come up with a few more of these maladies for emergencies later on.”

Maladies? That from first aid, too?”

He grinned.

“Nope. Reruns of General Hospital.”

“I guess I hadn’t really understood how difficult it could be to be famous,” the nurse offered.

“Some days it’s exhausting. Now, you two have beautiful natural smiles. This puss of mine takes a major full court press to squeeze one out. By bedtime my cheeks is like bubble gum. I don’t know how to thank you.”

He ate. The nurse busied herself facing away from them in case they wanted to get up close and personal for a few moments. As it turned out, that was not necessary. On

games days, Lamar was fully focused.

Game days, the team ate the evening meal together at a steak house – necessarily completed an hour before the contest began. It was, by far, the best eating Lamar got. He looked on it as a great perk for him – the good food – and his mother – lowered food budget during the season. Accordingly, he shed the mummy wrap two hours early.

His quiet time experience that morning had given him an opportunity to observe and think. For the first time he was free to notice some of the students who held back, who seemed to always be alone, and to whom nobody ever paid any attention. In his mind, that stunk, plain and simple. He and Carmen had spoken about it briefly during lunch.

“How can that happen – get to be fifteen or sixteen years old and still be all alone while you walk through these halls with three thousand other kids? Can you imagine having to come to school every day knowing that for the next eight hours not a single kid in the building was going to speak to you or, really, even acknowledge that you’re alive? I’d think they’d get so mad they’d burn the place down. Have you seen it?”

“This has really got to you, hasn’t it? Why all of a sudden? It’s always going on.”

“Two things I guess. You know that kid that drove the car that caused the accident Sunday morning. Somebody in the group of bystanders knew his family and said they couldn’t remember a time ever seeing him with a friend. They used that to be a *good* thing – the reason nobody was with him in the car to get hurt. Jeeze. Makin’ bein’ all alone in the World into a *good* thing! That burns my butt. Excuse that.”

“What’s the second thing?”

“This mornin’ I’ve been able to pay attention to them. It started out makin’ me wonder why I didn’t remember seein’ them before – before, while I was all busy slappin’ palms and grindin’ knuckles on all the kids who kept approachin’ me. Those really are mindless activities, you know – fivin’ and grindin’. Anyway, there they all were, walkin’ along all by themselves. Some looked at the kids they passed as if hoping somebody’d say something. Others were lookin’ at their

shoes, like they was afraid somebody'd say somethin' to them – be hurtful to them or somethin'. We gotta do somethin' about this. Are girls that way, too? I mostly noticed the boys, waitin' for some hand move from them."

They talked on for the time that remained. Then, the 'girls' re-wrapped his head and they moved out into the hall. Carmen turned left and Lamar, right.

As he mounted the first step on his climb to the third floor, he noticed a smaller boy being held upside down over a water cooler. The intention of the two senior boys was clear – drag his hair, head and shirt through the running water. Lamar marched up to the scene and slammed his backpack to the floor. *That* drew their attention. A crowd assembled and then took a step backwards. Lamar couldn't talk the way things were. He made sure the smaller boy was safe, bending down to help him pick up his books and folders that had been scattered across the floor. Then he turned his attention to the other two, who had made no move to leave. Lamar re-looped their belts, so they were attached at their hips. He took a paper tablet from the boy and began writing on it.

You two bullies will get your tails to Officer Manley immediately (the onsite policeman assigned to that section of the building) He continued writing. *Manley: These two cockrowches attacked my friend, – he pointed and had the boy add his name. I assume you will look into the mater. It is now 12:33. If I don't hear from you by 12:45, I will have to take things into my own hands. I'm sure none of us want that!*

He added his first name in large letters along with his cell number and shoved the two of them on their way – one carrying the message. The kids who had gathered moved out of the way. One of them began clapping. Soon, they were all clapping. Lamar did not acknowledge it. He continued to the third floor. He was seething, at the bullies, of course, but mainly at himself for having let such things go on apparently right in front him every day while he had been parading his celebrity by spreading high fives and such. He hoped he would be called to the principal's office. He had a few things to say.

MARIA – 5:

It had been a pretty good weekend – church with her family, dinner/lunch by whatever name at home, and a luscious dessert (strawberry cheesecake) with her whatever Stephen was. She liked him a lot, but with him would come so many complications – race, religion, financial level, social status, parental acceptance, and surely other things.

It was nearing ten p.m. She was sitting at the kitchen table playing with the leaves in the bottom of her long-cold cup of tea – *Constant Comment*, her favorite since her first sip, back before she entered school. Her mother entered carrying a basket of the kid’s laundry, fresh and warm from the dryer. It was one of Maria’s favorite aromas.

“Let me help you fold them, Mama. I can deliver them upstairs on my way to bed.”

“You’re up late, the night before a school day. Things okay?”

Maria smiled. Whenever she went off-routine her mother rushed in suspecting a problem.

“No problems, just things I need to think through. I think Stephen is getting serious way too soon.”

“Let me give you an old Spanish proverb I just made up – I’ll save you from the translation: Teenage boy always get serious too soon and teenage girl, if she’s sensible, always worries about it.”

“Papa, too?”

“Your Papa!”

She spread a grin and pushed a handful of air in her daughter’s direction.

“In his teenage fantasies, he already seen himself the father of four strappin’ sons out choppin’ wood, before he got up the nerve to kiss me the first time.”

They chuckled – some from the humor and some from uneasiness about the new sort of topic between them.

It led Maria to shift her feet and twist her long dark hair.

“Something is on your mind, *Hija preciosa* (my precious daughter) – a something for me, I’m thinking.”

“I don’t know how to bring it up without risking hurting

you and I'd never want to do that."

Her mother sighed.

"Ah. *That* time has finally come has it. About your birthday, yes?"

Maria looked into her lap and nodded.

"I suppose I should have brought it up back during one of our growing up talks. You are concerned that your birthday is just seven months after me and Papa's wedding anniversary. You were born two months premature – a few ounces over four pounds. You remained in the hospital almost two months. We took turns – one of us was always with you. Papa thought we should pretend we had been married a year longer than we had been to handle this kind of a problem for you. We decided to remain honest about it. Later, I will show you pictures of you all hooked up to little pipes and wires with the nurses – you layin' there inside a glass cage. We'd rub your tummy with our thumb and it would reach all the way from your chin to your belly button.

"This may seem inappropriate between a mother and her daughter," she continued, "but to help you understand, there's no way but to just say it. Maria, that first month after we was married, your Papa turned into a nonstop, try-to-make-a-baby-machine. We went at it like a couple of wild rabbits with no tomorrow. My full and honest belief is that you came into being that very first night - at nine o'clock or ten o'clock or eleven o'clock or twelve o'clock – I suppose you get the idea."

She reached out to Maria's chin and gently raised her head, so they were eye to eye. No words came, just tightly drawn shrugs and gentle laughter, nervous at first, then forehead to forehead joy.

"Thank you, Mama. Never in my wildest imagination – as it's probably too often said – could I have imagined you and I ever having *that* conversation."

"I must admit, I practiced for when the time would come."

Maria stood and kissed her mother on her cheek, then took the basket upstairs to deliver the clothes. My, how she loved that smell!

Once in bed, her mind seemed to have no intention of falling asleep. She spun a few fantasies and thought a lot about her future and boys – that was plural. She concluded that at 16 she was still going to have lots of boys in her life before her Prince Charming arrived. And, according to her mother they would all fall in love with her and believe their relationship was meant to be forever. It didn't seem entirely fair that the girl had to contribute the good sense to such relationships, but knowing that's how it was, would surely make life both easier and more predictable.

Life suddenly became more exciting. Somewhere out there in the world there was already a boy – most likely a total stranger – who, although he didn't know it, would one day become her husband.

People around her began noticing the changes. She walked the halls with her head up, a spring in her step and a smile. She always managed some way to recognize those she met or passed. She figured it had something to do with finally believing she was a legitimate human being – like the rest of them. It shouldn't have made a difference, she told herself. A good person was a good person regardless of the circumstances of their origin, and, since she had played absolutely no role in her creation, no blame could have been cast in her direction, anyway. She had told herself all that before, but now, not having to consider the possible dark side, she seemed more able to celebrate the bright side.

She was fascinated as she slowly came to feel less angry inside – doubly so, since she had never recognized it existed. Just what its source had been was hard to pinpoint; maybe her parents for their possible indiscretion; maybe herself for what she wrongly figured she might be; maybe the kids who hadn't tried hard enough to intrude on her life – to reach out to become her friend. She had seldom considered that one, but suddenly it made more sense than all the others put together.

Being lonely was the worst. Other people should have known that (*how*, she provided no clue), and should have tried harder to help her lower her shield and draw her toward them. It was unbelievable – wonderfully unbelievable – how, as she

confronted those several possibilities, she could actually feel wave after wave of anger drain away.

“So, this is how it feels? Light! As if I could fly. A smile that won’t be denied. I could never have imagined!”

JAMES – 5:

James passed his father’s bedroom as he dripped himself down the hall from the shower toward his own room. Without knocking, he opened the door and, seeing it empty, he entered and pretended a conversation.

“Good morning father dear. Who’s the chick? Ah. Millie. Nice to meet you Millie. Forgive my state of undress. My room’s at the end of the hall. My door’s always open.”

He had no idea whether he would ever deliver such a monologue in his father’s presence, but for some reason he found it both humorous and satisfying.

He went to the top dresser drawer and removed the hunting knife with which he often played. He continued his monologue. Apparently, Milly was no longer there.

“Sometimes at night, dad, I come in here while you’re sleeping and take out your knife. I could slit your throat in two seconds flat. I feel like letting it rain – feathers this morning, I think.”

He proceeded to slash the two pillows and spread their contents about the room. He jumped up on the bed and did a kindergarten dance – lots of back end wagging. He soon tired of that and went to his room to dress for school.

He wondered, all quite seriously, whether it was sicker for him to have done what he just did, or the fact that his father would never mention it to him.

“It’s such a grand life with the deranged leading the deranged.”

There was a new stash of food in the kitchen – a banana and a bowl of Cheerios with milk hit the spot. He took ten minutes to finish his algebra homework. He liked math and science – the experiments, not so much the reading. His freshman year he had been suspended for a week after he had taken a permanent marker to the human anatomy charts

in the biology lab – providing the more common and colorful names for the more interesting parts. It was one of the few times any of the other guys offered him high fives. For just a few moments he felt like a somebody – that would stay with him forever.

Wedged in under the grocery sack he found an envelope with his father's handwriting on it. 'Isn't there a big dance coming up? Here's some money to cover a tux, flowers, meals. Use Maxine's Limo service and it'll go onto my account. I'll bet you picked out a beauty. Please be careful and you know what I mean.'

Inside were three, 100-dollar bills.

"Idiot! The dance was last week."

He put the bills in his wallet, folded the assignment, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. He might or might not turn it in. It had been fun to work on.

The ancient, Grover Cleveland High School building had been built to accommodate 1,500 students. Nearly 3,000 currently pledged their allegiance to it and its mascot. The Auditorium or Assembly Hall, depending on the generation of teacher speaking about it, had seats for 1,500, making it necessary to hold double events – *Aarends* through *Myers*, first hour and *Natchez* through *Ziegfeld*, the second. The half not attending went to study halls.

The building was in poor repair although the custodial staff kept the hall and room walls brightly painted and surprisingly clean and clutter free. The joke was that the building was so old, Grover, himself, had painted the front door in that horrible shade of green – locally referred to as, RG – regurgitation green.

James typically arrived 30 minutes before first bell. He would find a perch on the top outside step or on the sidewalk beside the door from where he would offer his tireless barrage of greetings to all comers. All quite thoughtfully he chose spots where he was clearly in the way of traffic – students had to step around him. Nobody ever so much as tripped over him – brushed him, even – let alone acknowledged his existence. It was no more than he expected. He found he could even make disparaging remarks to girls who were with their

boyfriends and provoke no response, whatsoever.

From a distance, an uninformed observer watching the morning ritual might believe the others were responding to his constant chatter and waving. Why else would such a scrawny little twerp work so hard at it? Had James ever really hurt anybody at school? If he had, nobody remembered. Had James ever really threatened anybody at school? If he had, it was not general knowledge. One thing for sure, James was determined that people would know he'd been there, hence his 30-minute orgy of colorful patter and arm and hand gyrations each morning.

James, and perhaps only James, understood what was going on. He had no idea how to be appropriately friendly – well, he could fake it, but that wore thin in a hurry. Having had an off-putting and demanding personality since his days in diapers, he had been excluded from both formal and informal social groups – by the other kids. With no consistent opportunity for appropriate, early modeling, he had no source of information about how to go about it – it being making and holding friends. Like most preschoolers, if nobody would pay attention to him, he'd scream or hit or bite or take or break. When his agemates left him behind in size and strength, he had to find other ways or risk bodily harm – which was a common occurrence into his middle school years.

He learned to smile a lot on the outside, while seething on the inside. As he worked his way through each day, he kept up an *under-his-breath* running commentary, which, if it had been overheard, would have terrified the most seasoned of the staff. The counseling department had all but forbidden him from bothering them – his habit had been to make multiple appointments but refuse to talk about things *they* thought were relevant. Apparently, only a narrow range of psychological problems were treated there and clear cries for help from an unlikeable kid were not on their list.

There was one person in the school who never turned a deaf ear – Zeek, the custodian in charge of the boiler room – not the boiler, the boiler *room*. James would bend his ear for hours when the old man was free. Zeek was a good listener but with no experience as a parent, and no more than

minimally efficient mentally, he had little to offer other than that relationship – perhaps the best thing James had going in his life. Zeek would laugh at James' jokes over lunch in the boiler room – James usually managed to bring lunch from the deli or a burger place between 4th and 5th periods – a built-in time-out and lunch period for staff and students.

Since the beginning of his Sophomore year, James seldom caused problems in classrooms. It seemed to have become an unwritten arrangement: if the teachers left James alone, James left the teachers alone. It was an abominable plan, but only James appeared to see that – allowing the distant student to become even more distant. People were idiots – plain and simple.

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CHAPTER SIX

AMY – 6:

“Hey, great news. My art teacher says the school board chose me as one of the 3 finalists to paint the new official picture of the school building. With the addition a few years ago and the new entryways, they think it’s time to update the big picture that hangs in the main lobby. The winner will get paid like a real artist. I need to furnish a set of sketches by the first of May.”

“That’s so fine,” her mother said. “Well need to hear all the details over supper. How’s your homework load tonight?”

“Light, actually. You need something?”

“Dad and I have a chance to go to a play this evening – tickets free from one of the Kiwanis Club members.”

“Great. Sure. Go. I can handle the zoo, here.”

“About that. What do you think of this – that we leave *nobody* in charge but expect all three of you to pitch in and make the evening work? Marc’s feeling left out, since when you were his age we were leaving you in charge of the boys.”

“I see. Even better, maybe. Less responsibility for me.”

“Whether in charge or not, you sometimes tend to get a little bossy, love, and only daughter of my life. You’ll have to draw back and let the boys make some decisions. Unless you require the Fire Department, the Police or the EMT’s, we need you to just cool it.”

“I see. A new role unfolding here.”

“Three, actually, we hope.”

“How about you just lock each of us in our room for the night? All interpersonal problems and disputes disappear.”

“I hope you’re pulling my leg because I really believe it’s time to make this work – I believe it’s time that it *can* work.”

“You know you can count on me. Evenings when you run out for a few minutes, we seldom steer very far off course. How different can it be? Sure. I assume you’ll get some sort of commitment out of the other two and leave me the key to the dungeon just in case it becomes necessary to use the rack.”

“What a sweet big sister. Knowing you’d come through for me, I sort of already sprung it on them and they seem eager to give it a try.”

The boys entered the kitchen.

“Did you hear the news,” Tommy began, looking up at Amy. “Tonight, we get to send *you* to *your* room.”

“Mom?”

“Just kidding,” he came back quickly. “All equals. It should be great.”

“Marc? How about you?” Amy asked.

She wanted a clear commitment with witnesses.

“Of course. I’ve been the most mature kid around here for the past three years. It seems I’m the only one who noticed.”

His mother winked at him. He smiled. Subterfuge, perhaps? She continued.

“You’ll each be responsible for getting yourself to bed on time, showered if you need one, alarm set, clothes set out and homework finished. Any questions?”

In unison, three, halo-topped, angelic heads shook no. The mere image struck terror into her heart.

With supper out of the way, Amy spoke.

“Guys, why don’t we do up the dishes tonight so mom and dad don’t have them waiting when they get home?”

Tommy turned to Marc.

Did that sound like an order dressed up in a question?”

“Could have been. Perhaps she’ll sweeten the deal if we drag our feet with a response.”

“Guys. I’m right here. Jeeze.”

Their mother turned to their father as he entered from the hall.

“See how well everything is going, dear. Let’s grab our coats and leave. I’d like to be at least a block away before things start going up in flames.”

Tommy the Imp, had a final question. “Just in case, where will we find the number for 911?”

* * *

Amy, relaxing in her loose and comfy bed-time outfit, was at the kitchen table perusing a new Spring clothing catalog when their parents returned. She looked at the clock on the stove.

“Ten thirty. Right on time. Nice going parents. Perhaps next time we can talk about extending curfew by a half hour.”

She smiled and closed the catalog.

“Have a good time? The boys did the dishes. There’s some ice cream left in the freezer if you want it. Coffee’s ready to make – now or in the morning; just press the button.”

Her father helped her mother off with her coat.

“I assume things went well here,” he said, really trying to ask without prying.

“Pretty good. Just the usual stuff. Well, I better get to bed. Need to leave for school early – with Sue.”

She delivered a peck to each parent’s cheek and went upstairs.

Mother took a chair. Father held his hand over the ‘on’ button and waited for her direction. She nodded. He pushed. The grand aroma followed almost immediately.

He pointed to the freezer. She nodded. He removed the carton of ice cream, picked out two spoons from the drawer, and took a chair beside her.

“It was a good time, out together, tonight,” he said.

She nodded.

“Would have been a good deal better if we had known how well things were apparently going back here at the ranch.”

“We have three wonderful kids, you know,” she said.

“I know. I brag about them all the time at work. You know what Benny said about that? He said, ‘With you two for

parents, how could they possibly turn out any other way?' And you know what? I think he's right. We've worked hard to see that all of us have gotten to this point. I took his compliment, unabashedly – is that right word?"

"We'll have to check on that with Tommy and his Thesaurus in the morning."

It was worth face to face smiles and more than the mere indication of a meaningful kiss.

"How do you suppose we ever did such a good job?" he asked.

"Maybe we just managed to conceive perfect children and *they* really did all the work."

"They *have* raised us, too, you know, mother. I understand that, now. I wouldn't have, back in our early familying days. Who knew it would be – needed to be – a two-way street?"

"What do *you* think are some of the best things we've learned from them?" she asked, after offering that face that indicated the treat she was enjoying was delicious beyond measure. "We've spent so many late evenings sitting right here wondering what way *we* needed to go with this or that, I guess we've never looked at it from the other direction."

"For one thing," he said, "they've taught us what a privilege it is to have such precious little beings bounding through our lives with us."

"And that regardless of any pressures on them to turn out the way we want them to, the biggest part of them will always remain who they are at their core – their unique Amy-ness and Marc-ness and Tommy-ness."

"Somedays it felt like all we ever had time to do was worry about protecting them," he said.

"The past year or so, at least for me, there's been lots of worrying – *wondering with an edge*, maybe – about how well they will be able to keep themselves safe, now that most of those decisions are up to them. It's such a different world from when we were their ages."

"I'm sure our parents posed that same worry as we prepared to meet the world, mostly on our own."

"I suppose. All in all, I guess we *have* done pretty well."

“We have been thoughtful parents, dear. We’ve taken our roles very seriously – the most important roles of our lives. We’ve made it an important goal all these years to learn what we needed to know. We can’t expect more from us than that. They’ll have problems. We’ve had problems. I hope the thing we’ve done best for them, is help them learn how to meet and handle all the unknowns awaiting them out there.”

“I thought you were going to say, ‘lurking’ out there. I like your take better, but I’m not sure I believe it.”

JUSTIN – 6:

You will never in a million years guess what happened at the pool this afternoon. Guess!”

His mother, sitting with a cup of freshly brewed coffee at the kitchen table, put on a puzzled look.

“So, my quandary is this: do I believe my son when he says there is no way I will ever guess – in which case I would *not* guess – or do I follow his enthusiastic directive to go ahead and guess anyway?”

“You’re taking too long. I’ll tell you.”

He turned a chair around and took a seat, leaning forward, facing her, arms folded across its back.

“I saved a man’s life – not a drill or a practice save but a real save.”

“My goodness! How wonderful. He’s alright, then?”

“Listen to me, mom. This isn’t about him it’s about me – I saved him.”

“How did it all happen? Was this during your lifesaving class?”

“It was and here’s the scoop. I will be happy to repeat it if you miss anything during the first rendering. We were doing timed laps, underwater, the length of the pool. Mr. Nivens – he’s an older guy who’s taking the class – went just before me. Our instructor was up on deck demonstrating a stronger stroke technique to one of the class members. Jackson, with the stopwatch, told me to start my crossing – each one takes about a minute and we like overlap in 30 second intervals. I took my breaths, submerged and started my lap. Well, what

do you suppose I saw laying there on the bottom of the pool?"

He paused as if expecting a response. She leaned in close to him and lowered her voice.

"The *Loch Ness Monster*?"

"Mo-om."

She tried a second time.

"The *Loch Ness Monster* looking embarrassed to have been found?"

"I'm serious. Anyway – and that was really funny – anyway, I swam down to investigate. The man was unconscious. An unconscious body will usually surface, *unless . . .*"

He twirled his hand urging her to make a response.

"*Unless* he's being ravaged by Mrs. Loch Ness Monster."

It was worth a quick smile between them.

"*Unless* it has taken water into its lungs. So, I knew . . ."

Again, with the twirl.

"You knew that he was in serious condition with possible water in his lungs, so you approached him from the rear, grasped him under his armpits, and, using your legs for power, carried him to the surface where you placed him in a cross-chest carry and moved directly to the closest ladder, calling for help as you went. Had it been an open water rescue like in a lake where he had to be moved some distance, you would have made regular compressions of his chest with your carry arm in case there had been heart failure."

"Well, ya, but how did you . . .?"

"Who's been quizzing you on your manual these past few weeks?"

"Ah. So, she is not only a good reader and beautiful lady, she is intelligent as well."

"And never forget it. *Now*, can I ask how *he* is?"

"Sure."

Impish silence.

"I'm asking! I'm asking!"

"I still don't know, mom, honestly. The EMTs said most likely a sudden onset heart attack or aneurysm – so fast he

lost consciousness immediately and, as a reflex, his body gasped for a breath and drew in water. We drained his lungs and he was breathing with oxygen when they took him away.”

“Sounds like a celebration is in order to me, *Lamb Chop*.”

“You haven’t called me that in years.”

“Not since you threatened to send me to the old folks’ home at 30 if I ever used the term again. You’re not going to, are you?”

“That may depend on the extent of the celebration you have up your sleeve.”

“Pizza at *Alfonos*. Ten minutes, go, change. Anything you can do about that lingering chlorine odor, which will surely make others confuse you with an old washer woman?”

“It will be like magic—will have the scent of roses or . . . what other flowers have scents? Is *Brute* a flower?”

“I get your point. Go. We want to beat the college kids for the corner booth.”

Alfonos’ was Italian owned and operated. It had been in the family three generations and was one of the few places Justin could remember having gone with his mother *and* father. *Signor Alfonso*, the second, was the current host. He always took good care of Justin and his mother — understanding about their loss.

“The usual for the Mrs. and the son?” he asked walking them to ‘their’ booth.

“*Si, per favore*, Justin answered in his very best pizzeria Italian.

They lingered a long time after the pizza was gone and the third pitcher of pop had been drained.

“We have things worked out good don’t we, mom?”

“Things?”

“You, me, here, now, without dad.”

“Yes, I believe we do.”

“What do you think he’d think of me?”

“I’m not sure that’s a fair question.”

“Please try. It’s a question I need answered and you are the only source I have in the entire universe. Surely you can put some bits and pieces together for me — best guesses.”

“I’m afraid it will sound a lot like what I’d tell you I thought of you, Justin.”

“So long as it’s as genuine as you know how to be, that’ll be fine. You can skip the general stuff – good looks, brains, great hair, you know.”

She offered a quick smile to meet his and then became clearly thoughtful, not rushing her response.

“You and he are alike in so many ways. That would have pleased him. He had a ready sense of humor and saw the funny side of things many folks missed. Like you do. He often said he couldn’t imagine attempting to walk life’s path without that take on things. He would appreciate your thoughtfulness – you seldom run to conclusions without deliberate consideration. He would be proud of your honesty and your compassion and your clear desire to make the world a better place. You ask questions when you don’t understand or when you require more information. Your dad would be impressed by your dedication to activities and causes you believe in – your devoted study of the piano, your volunteer work, the fight you led to save the little park across from the school when a developer was planning to turn it into a parking place for food trucks.

“Most of all, I suppose, he would be impressed by the strength and vigor with which you attack life. You clearly love life and so did he. You’ve heard his recordings – he could touch your heart and draw tears with a simple rendition of chop sticks or turn the most revered pieces of the masters into fall on the floor hilarious renditions – inserting ‘Popeye the Sailor Man’ into ‘Clair de lune’, for example. He’d turn to the audience and say, ‘Just checking to see if you’re still awake.’”

“Thanks. That helps more than you can possibly know. So, pass/fail I’m thinking he’d say I pass?”

“He’d shout it from the nearest rooftop. Quite truthfully, I can’t think of one thing about you he would not be proud of.”

Justin sat quietly. His eyes teared up. His mother reached across the table and took his hands in hers. She matched his tears with her own.

They nodded into each other’s faces.

“Like you said, son, we have made a good thing. Your

father would be proud of that, also – us, here, this way. You know how much I love you.”

“Probably not, really. I’ve never been a parent but ask me in ten years and I plan to have a full answer ready for you. Since you’ve already *been* a kid – even if a century ago – I know you understand about the love I have for you. I love dad, too. You think that’s possible – continuing to love somebody who’s gone forever from your life?”

“When you have loved somebody, son, they are *never* gone from your life.”

LAMAR – 6:

Although it was an optional assembly that noon, every seat was taken. The outside walls were crowded with those willing to stand in order to be there. Word was, that Lamar had something important to say. The lights dimmed. The spotlight came up in the center of the stage. Lamar stepped through the curtains. The applause was wild. He stood at the podium, serious, making no attempt to recognize the positive reception. The students became quiet – most puzzled. It was not the smiling, waving, wisecracking Lamar they were used to.

“I’ve come to some very serious conclusions about people this week. Life guides some of us to become selfish piles of crap. Life guides most of us to be something better than that. The real test of a person, however, is how he guides himself. I am one of the lucky ones. My Mama insisted that I always treat others with respect and compassion. Because of that, *I* now insist that *I* always treat others with respect and compassion. For a while, I must admit, I forgot that, and let myself be guided by the lure of high fives for three pointers. I lost my focus. I am sorry for that.

“There isn’t no glory in being the star basketball player in a school where everybody’s happiness and well-bein’ isn’t the first priority. As long as one of us has to walk these halls alone, feelin’ separate from the rest of us – feelin’ scared of any of us – we are failin’ as a student body, and worse, we are each failin’ as a human being.

“A girl, who I don’t even know, named Amy from an art class, made signs for me – the prototypes for what I hope will soon appear on every door in this school building.” He held one up. “The first one has black figures on a yellow triangle. It holds a large B, which stands for Bullying, and has a slash across it meaning ‘no’ – No Bullying. The second one – here – uses the same shape and colors. On it there is a silhouette of a person standin’ all alone, away from the crowd. It also has a slash across it. No more loneliness, especially no more rejection.

“Here is the third one – red on blue – three kids standin’ in an open circle, beckonin’ to a fourth as if offering their friendship – their inclusion. Of the three, I think this one is the most important because when what it shows is really happenin’, then the other two won’t never be needed again.

“I guess that’s what I have to say. Please, do not clap. Please, *do* take time before you go to sleep tonight to think long and hard about how you may need to change in order to assure that respect and compassion and inclusion comes to direct our lives so nobody – that’s *no-body* – ever feels unwanted or left out here at GCHS.”

Lamar turned and slipped backstage between the curtains. The assembly hall remained quiet as the lights came up. It was as if no one wanted to leave. The Lamar of their lives had suddenly forced them to take stock, grow up, and take charge.

* * *

It was well past midnight. Lamar heard an unfamiliar noise down stairs. With a sensible degree of caution, he went out into the hall and approached the stairs. A light came on in the living room – the door was open into the hallway at the bottom of the stairs. He carried a bat as he descended the steps. At the open door he looked inside.

“Delbert!”

“That you, my sweet little brother, Boo Boo?”

“You’re drunk.”

“You noticed. If I could just figure out how to stand up I would shake your talented hand – pride of your mother’s eye.”

“No need to stand. You’ll sleep right there on the floor

and in the mornin' you will leave mama's house forever. I been findin' out stuff for you. I have it in a envelope there on the end table. There is places in the city that helps people like you. They'll get you sober and keep you sober and find you a place to live and place you in a job, so you can take care of yourself. You can do it or not, but you ain't gonna keep tearin' our mama apart. You know I can beat you to a pulp with one arm tied behind me and, if you ever show your sorry ass around here again, I will. You're a piece of crap – a piece a crap that I *have* to love because you're my brother, but I don't have to let you ruin mama's life no more."

At some point Delbert had fallen asleep. No problem. He'd get a repeat version once he sobered up. Knowing his brother's inability to face conflict and confrontation, Lamar stuffed the envelope inside the front of Delbert's pants just in case he left.

Lamar's instincts had been correct. By morning the man was gone. The next day, he didn't bring up the issue from the night before. He and his mother went through their usual rituals – breakfast, her itinerary for the day, a list of things for Lamar to take care of if he had time, and the parting pecks to each other's faces.

During those past several days, Lamar's life had changed in several ways. At school he had clearly become a somebody, respected for his whole person – not just liked because he was the top jock. People who had never spoken to him before stopped to chat, sometimes asking for advice or offering to help. Teachers he'd never had for courses, also, acknowledged him as they passed in the hallways. He found himself volunteering in class – sometimes answers and sometimes questions. Lamar suddenly had lots of questions. Although he would never have admitted that he had been uncomfortable in classrooms before, he suddenly felt quite comfortable – at ease, even. He was no longer the freak sitting there – the tall, skinny, black kid who had trouble fitting into the desk; he was a participant whose opinion other kids and teachers sought – maybe even admired.

The most notable change he discovered, was his desire to hand in homework that was well above the minimum

requirement. It was not to impress the teachers; it was because he wanted to know things – knowledge for itself – things, which before had only held value because they'd lead to grades that would maintain his eligibility and help him get into college. He listened to his music less and read more.

One evening, at the end of a game, while the teams mindlessly played out the ritual of lining up, shaking hands, and exchanging sweat and comforting lies, the opposition's best player pulled him aside.

"You are really something else, man. I don't mean just the way you cleaned our plows tonight, but I been hearin' things. It sounds like you *own* Cleveland High. Lots of good stuff going on over there. Can we get together and talk sometime?" Shocked, Lamar would have no memory of how he responded, but he would make certain they got together.

All his life he'd known his brother was, in his words, a piece of crap. Early on in life he had concluded his father must have also been a piece of crap. That pretty well assured that he was one, too. It was the only reasonable way to regard himself – jury in, verdict delivered.

But, during those past several weeks, something had been eroding that image – chipping away, a little here and a little there, gradually revealing something new underneath. At first, it had been more than a little uncomfortable – witnessing the image that he had always known, begin to change. Maybe it had been since Carmen – he wasn't sure. There was something OK about him, Lamar Jackson, the person. Carmen saw it. His coach saw it. Mr. Burton saw it and of course his Mama had always seen it. It came to him that maybe Delbert had seen it as well. Maybe he understood he couldn't compete with little brother so turned himself into an irresponsible monster that nobody would ever expect to compete. If that were true, Lamar needed to rethink his lifetime ban – that good for nothing, disgusting man needed his *help* not his contempt. Now *there* was a lifechanging revelation.

MARIA – 6:

Her essay was going well – so well, that her head just wouldn't turn off once she began working on it. She let Stephen read drafts of sections as she added them. Her ideas sobered him. He brought her references from articles he'd read and asked important questions that required shifts in content or her method of presentation or at least, additional research. She had no idea he was so well read on such topics – and so smart. He was, in fact, an excellent writer. He almost always had a featured piece in the *Weekly Beacon* – the school paper.

It was nearing nine p.m. The two of them were sitting on the front steps making ready to part for the night.

"Sometimes, I think you are really writing this essay just for me – to enlighten me about important things you believe I've never considered before," Stephen said.

"I'm not, I don't think, but what if I was? It sounds like you're saying that would be a bad thing."

"It does, doesn't it. Hmm. Things you are saying have made me face the fact that I'm a whole lot more like my father than I thought I was – that stinks!"

"Like how?"

"Well, let's see. Like believing that since I've earned my money – investments – it is mine and I have no obligation to use any of it to help other people – like those who aren't as smart and can't earn a lot, or like those who, unlike me, have health issues that keep them from living efficient or effective lives, or even like those who have come up against a streak of bad luck, like Veterans, and find themselves dying on the vine – helpless to help themselves – that also fits a lot of old people – the *discarded progenitors*, one author calls them.

"It is referred to as egocentric thinking – that *I* am all that really matters – contrasted with social-centric thinking or humanity-centric thinking in which a person believes he's a necessary part of a greater body and has the responsibility and the privilege of offering what he can to make life safe and happy and productive for everybody. My father is strictly egocentric. I've always thought I was humanity-centric, but the more stuff and money I acquire, the less willing I am to share it. It's like my main question is, 'what if someday I need

that money? If I share it, I won't have anything left'. It's like living in the ultimate state of irrational insecurity. That becomes one's motivation for everything – make money, keep money, to hell with anybody else."

"So, you're afraid *you want what you want*, and to hellsibob with what anybody else wants?"

"Yeah. *Wants* or worse, yet, *needs*."

"Uncomfortable?"

"I'll say. To hold an egocentric position means you must *never* allow yourself to examine it for its morality or universal truth – because it has none. You have to avoid all data that produce doubts and allow yourself to sidestep logic, or just out and out lie to maintain your position. You come to believe your own lies. What is factual and real and clearly reasonable, no longer matter. The fate of other human beings no long matters – at a personal level. You could pass through a field of dead and dying, sick and starving human beings and not feel a twinge of compassion or sorrow – certainly no remorse. They should have been able to take care of themselves like I have. Only protecting yourself and yours matters. It produces the most despicable human beings God could ever imagine. Worse than that, they become the ones with money and power. They are the ones running the world. It's really scaring me."

"You have been deep into thinking about it, haven't you?"

"For a long time. Too much, I'm thinking. I thought life was supposed to get clearer and easier as we grow up and learn more. It isn't that way. When I tried to talk with dad about it you know what he did – he made an appointment for me with a shrink saying that kind of talk is crazy."

"Did you go?"

"Go, going, gone, as they say."

"I don't understand."

"Sorry. Yes, I went, and I've been going twice a week for months. The more I talk about it, the more I seem to hate everybody. Why can't everybody just agree and get along? The kids at school just float along, worrying about who likes who and how they're going to screw somebody out of

something – win the contest, be the valedictorian, become the city-wide champions. None of that crap matters, but they don't even know that.”

“I had no idea you were so upset about life. I guess I had no idea about a lot of things until just now – like how really brilliant you are.”

“Yeah, well, I keep things to myself. I'm really sorry I went off that way just now. After all, Dad's sending me to the most expensive shrink in the city. I should be a changed person – that means *his* clone – just any moment now. At my last session I told my shrink he had no business treating me because he was just as self-centered and greedy as my dad – how could he offer a course of unbiased treatment?”

Stephen stood, pounding one fist into the other open palm.

“I guess I don't feel like doing the kiss-thing tonight. Sorry that I ruined things. See you at school tomorrow if you still want to see me.”

He turned and walked to his car making no attempt to hide his seething anger. Maria watched him drive away – too fast, too recklessly, to mindlessly. She was worried. It was the first time she had seen any hint of that unhappy – distraught – emotionally driven, angry person. She had no idea what to do. She certainly would not add that worry to her parent's lives. (Big mistake, Maria!)

* * *

Maria knew she would not be able to put the conversation out of mind and get to sleep. She went upstairs and gathered the three youngest children into one of their beds and read to them for a long time. *Winnie the Pooh* contained a wealth of wisdom. She hoped she would run across something she might find personally useful.

If anything useful had come from her evening, it was how much she realized her Prince Charming would have to love children, himself, and life – probably not in that order. She tucked the little ones in and returned to her room.

Stephen clearly needed help. He was getting help. Did that mean she should not meddle in things? His father had to know about his state of mind – he had arranged for him to

receive help. The Psychiatrist knew. Surely among all of them he would be well cared for.

She didn't want to abandon him, but neither did she want to have a person with such massive problems in her life. Like Stephen had implied, growing up did not seem to be making life easier.

JAMES – 6:

James hated guns. They frightened him. It was why he regularly spent time handling them – hoping that would desensitize him to their frightening countenance – he also regularly used words like 'desensitize' and 'frightening countenance' inside his head. He had been called many things in his short life, but dumb or uninformed had never been one of them. Smart; dumb; it didn't matter. Few things mattered other than he was determined, in the end, that people would recognize his presence – have good reason to remember he had walked the Earth.

He had taught himself how to disassemble and reassemble each of the dozen guns in his father's den and prided himself on his speed. Being a good father, he had seen that the gun cases and racks were always locked – as was the den, in fact. That proved to be the motivation James needed when younger to master the art and science of lock picking. If it took more than seven seconds to open a case or unlock a gun guard he believed himself a failure. He had never actually fired a gun. Why would he? His meat arrived pre-dead. He saw no value in pulverizing paper targets or clay pigeons. Why practice to get good at something you had no intention of doing or needing to do. Anyway, pulling a trigger couldn't really be all that difficult. He had watched training videos on the web.

He supposed if somebody put him in danger he would not hesitate to blow the person's head off. He had to admit that image intrigued him. In his fantasies, it was usually his mother's – sometimes his father's – sometimes that black kid at school everybody suddenly idolized. If he had let his imagination roam, it might have come to include the members

of the counseling department and the snippy secretary in the principal's office.

His father was a specialized hunter – deer, elk, mountain goats. He made a pilgrimage to Colorado for a week every year to prove his manhood by unleashing his killer instinct on the helpless creatures of the wilds. That year had been the first time he had invited James to accompany him. Upon first offer, he declined. His father doubled down with the clear implication there could be girls. Still, he declined. Although he and his father's lives seldom actually crossed – co-occupying the same 100 square feet of plant Earth – James relished the times when he knew for sure his father was not there.

For a boy who read slowly and unsteadily, he enjoyed books and had learned a good deal more on his own than he had from formal instruction. In 8th grade, he had become interested in bombs and their construction. The web was a natural resource for instruction. He had even ordered and procured the necessary gadgetry and chemicals and produced a dozen or so small devices in his basement. He took them to the abandoned gravel pit west of the city and set them off. His interest waned.

There was one current school assignment that had, surprising to him, caught his interest. For that very reason, of course, he dared not give any indication that it had. That was an important part of his well-established and long running relationship with formal education. He had done the assignment – English – and even turned it in; it was to be a short essay on the *Purpose of Life*.

His one sentence response to the assignment (it was to be short) had been: *The purpose of life is to prepare one to die*. He knew that had been glib. He figured it would have been more acceptable in a Catholic school than a public school. Put a little of the right kind of dogma-based meat on the premise and it probably would have earned a pretty good grade at St. Martins (even with the mixed metaphor). He prided himself on just how glib he could be and for how long he could maintain any ongoing state of glibness.

St. Martins was one of several elementary schools that

had promised his parents they would soon straighten him out. So much for that. Hmm. There were a good number of old lady's heads there that he might enjoy getting in the cross-hairs of one of his father's weapons – probably a shotgun for obvious reasons. He would systematically break all their knuckles first, however. He figured that, properly constructed, that scenario just might offer the makings for a pretty good, if twisted, before sleep fantasy.

In classrooms that allowed students to pick their own seats, James typically chose the front row nearest the door. Ease of access. A quick in and out. Also, he figured no student could avoid seeing him there – ignore him. The next morning, he slid into his preferred seat in first hour, English class. The teacher began by handing back the essays. Few in the room paid attention even after he began speaking. It was their daily ritual – their give and take.

“Several of you posed interesting ideas. A few of you even demonstrated a minimal grasp of the English language. [My, why did the students dislike him?] One of you, however, offered a profound take on the assignment. James, will you honor us with a rendition of what you wrote?”

“Having the grasp of the English language that I do, Sir, I am going to assume you really didn't mean that in the format of the question you posed. As it stands, it calls for a yes or no answer.”

There were some snickers. A few of the students refocused their attention toward the front of the room.

“I suppose you are technically correct, James. Please, honor us with a rendition of what you wrote.”

“Since the word ‘rendition’ implies some version other than the original, would you prefer mine in the mode of a whining, Stephen Foster piece, or something more upbeat from your era, like Lawrence Welk and his Champagne Music Makers?”

More students turned in their seats to see who the kid was who was making the humorous remarks. Anybody who could put down Mr. Clemens that way couldn't be all bad.

“Just read what you wrote in response to the assignment.”

“We could have saved a great deal of time if you had just said that right up front. Okay.”

There was laughing out loud. It appeared to be a routine of some sort that the two of them cooked up. They wondered where it was leading. James stood, faced the class and read what was there, under the large, red A+.

“The purpose of life is to prepare one to die.” He bowed. “Thank you, friends, family, fans, those of you eavesdropping at the CIA.”

Some clapped. It quickly faded away when it became clear the teacher wasn’t laughing. He, again, addressed, James.

“Will you elucidate on what you wrote?”

“Isn’t it against the law to elucidate in public?”

The kids laughed, again.

“We get your message, James. You’re a joke machine. Please continue.”

“Speaking of machines, did you hear the one about the secretary who backed into the Xerox machine? She was beside herself all day. Ta dum dum.”

There was desk thumping laughter.

“James, that will be quite enough.”

He bowed again and sat down.

“I meant enough of the funny stuff. Up! Up! Talk about the content of your essay.”

I do apologize, Sir, but really, after all these class sessions of complete boredom you must agree these kids deserved a break.

Chuckles rose. Chuckles subsided. James had no idea why he had been allowed to remain in the room. With most teachers, he’d have been kicked out well before he had elucidated in public. So, he stood and began talking in a serious vein.

“Life is nothing we ask for – we get stuck with it and apparently some Polly Anna, somewhere, once decided that after getting it, we are each required to make the best of it – excel in it even. Here’s the real scoop, guys. You’re born. You die. Those are like life’s bookends. In between, a guy can pretend he’s got a shot at happiness or greatness, but

that's all part of the master deceptive plan. They urge us to keep so busy thinking we can make something good out of life that we don't have time to recognize that we can't. It's all a big lie. My plan is a lot simpler. Be born. Live no longer than I absolutely have to. Die. Unlike the assumption in my essay, there should be no preparation to it. Just do it. Get it over with. Our elements existed in perfect peace before we were conceived. There will be, again, perfect peace once we are dead. In between – chaos, pain, isolation, rejection, hate and self-hate, deception, striving after artificial and impossible goals – all fully purposeless activities. It goes on and on. I'll tell you this, if it weren't for sex, I would have checked out long ago."

He sat down. Having had that chance to say out loud the very things he said under his breath every day – which always included humorous takes on things – had, he figured, given some purpose to those few minutes in his life. Who could expect more than a few minutes of purpose? Perhaps in the future, he should adjust up his decibel level while dispensing his utterances in the halls. If nothing else, it would surely be more irritating.

Silence had settled onto the room from the moment he began his serious monologue. The kids *had* listened. Not even the ancient desks had creaked or had the torn window shades fluttered. Not a single nail got filed or a set of eyes wandered. The teacher had taken his seat, uncertain if the boy should be allowed to continue, but too engrossed to stop him. James, having lived a life in silence, wasn't about to put up with that. He stood, turned toward the door and left. Nobody pursued him. He knew, of course, no one would. It felt like how he envisioned it would be walking from the din and hubbub of the big bang, back into the calm and absolute silence of a black hole. He was glad he had been forced to say it. Finally, hearing it all laid out in that way made him grasp the truth of it. His proper future rushed in upon him; his next required steps became crystal clear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AMY – 7:

It was eight p.m. The four children were huddled on the floor in the alcove at the top of the cellar steps. Amy was speaking.

“Saturday the 24th is Mom and Dad’s 20th wedding anniversary and we’re going to throw them a party.”

“Commands the Princess of 1482 Cedar Lane,” Tommy added more because such a remark would be expected then that it came from his heart – or spleen or wherever Tommy’s unique takes on life originated.

“I assume you’re both in,” she continued.

Marc answered first.

“Sorry, there is the potential that I may have a hot date with a roller derby star.

And then, Tommy.

“Let me check my calendar – there’s something about accepting the Nobel Peace Prize.”

Such flack had been a part of her life for so long, she seldom acknowledged it anymore.

“So?”

“Sure.”

“Of course.”

“Great. I was thinking of a ‘teen years’ theme – from back when they were teens.”

“They were teens once?” Tommy joked.

“In the era of Wilma and Fred!” Marc noted more than

asked. "We can turn the basement into a cave and make bats and draw pictograms on the walls."

"Picto-whats?" Tommy asked.

He knew the term but thought it would be fun to say, picto-whats. It had not been a disappointment.

"Picto-whats, picto-whats, picto-whats."

"So, great! You two boys have volunteered to get the basement ready. That's good. Here's a list of things I thought might be fun – just starter ideas. I'll borrow music of their era from the library. We'll serve ice cream sodas and huge cookies with outlines of dinosaurs on them. I'll take care of that. Sue's mom says I can do the baking at their house."

"Did they even still make ice cream sodas 35 years ago?" Marc asked. "I thought that was a 1950s thing."

"It's the aura, not the authenticity that counts."

"Can we invite gram and gramp?" Tommy asked.

"Of course."

"This will be great. How about . . ."

The conversation went on for another fifteen minutes with eager participation from all quarters. That should be sufficient time in which to plan the gala event of a lifetime.

Marc made a sign for the basement door: NO PARENTS ALLOWED UNTIL AFTER FEB 25TH.

Certainly, *that* offered the grownups no clue that something was afoot.

* * *

It seemed to Amy that lots of good things were moving forward in her life: almost a dozen paintings in the All City Art Exhibit, the possibility of doing a painting of the school that might hang there for years, at least passing recognition from the basketball players for her work on the banner and Lamar for her help, what seemed like a steady relationship with a really nice boy, as much freedom to come and go as she desired, the use of the car on occasion, a full hand of school subjects heading toward A's, a best friend only a block away, a great family (even if she included her brothers), and bed-time fantasies that consistently painted a very positive future. If one of the possible art scholarships came through, life could probably be little better.

She knew she would miss her family if she got into the college of her choice – it was 300 miles away through piled high snowdrifts all winter. It wasn't like in the old days when her parents were in college, back in the era of smoke signals and hilltop to hilltop semaphore messaging – there were cell phones with face to face capabilities. She was counting on that to ease the transition.

She would miss all of them, of course, but she'd miss Tommy the most and understood he would miss her as well. She was already making plans to leave special notes for him, hidden around the house. Come September, she would begin providing clues directing him to them – one a week, maybe more at first. She knew Marc would understand – he also adored his brother – well, most of the time – at least some of the time – well there had been that time when he was six. . .

Her academic record was very good – not Valedictorian-good, but Honor Student-good. It meant she would get to wear a red cowl over her white robe at graduation. For Amy, it was akin to her feelings about winning contests, but she was coming to grips with it and no longer commandeered entire mealtimes ranting on. Her rants would undoubtedly be missed when she left for college.

As her present for her parent's anniversary, Amy was painting a family portrait – no big get together sitting, just a composite that emerged from her impressions. Deviating from her usual medium, she selected acrylics, which, she believed, allowed better possibilities for control and realism. It was more an organized collage of individual portraits than the typical family sitting. With mom and dad at the top, she was arranging the three children below them. Left to right it would be Marc, then Amy, and finally Tommy. She had already completed the parents and was satisfied with the likenesses. She had also basically finished her brothers – a studious Marc and, of course, an impish Tommy.

Amy, better than anyone, understood there were several, Amys – the artsy Amy; the quiet, reflective Amy; the in your face in the presence of injustice, Amy; and the intelligent, responsible, bring things together and make it all work Amy. Each had a distinctive look. Which to use?

She was leaning toward a composite of those, more like a school picture. She had it blocked in with size, form and hues but had not begun setting in specific features. Putting her brushes down for the night she stood back and did that thing that artists do – moving her head up and down and leaning it side to side, studying her picture as it was emerging from the canvas. Usually, she felt a thrill. That night she felt a chill. It seemed each member of her family was just hanging there, impatiently encouraging her to appear and complete the family unit.

JUSTIN – 7:

Justin was busy at the Boy's Club getting things ready for the annual talent show, scheduled to begin in 30 minutes. That year, he and his friend Winston were in charge – well, there was Mrs. Blankenship, but she was less in charge and more the self-appointed censor of all things off color or too revealing of the flesh – the boys chuckled because she had so much flesh not to be revealed.

Chairs were arranged left and right of a center aisle in the large, multi-purpose room. Draped, wooden crates created the perfect stage at one end. The volunteer, nine-piece band of high school kids was set up on the floor just to the right of the platform. It included kids from all three high schools in the city.

Acts included six-year-old tumblers, teens on the trampoline, a sword fight on stilts, musical presentations and a man who painted quick pictures upside down on huge canvases. There were many others. An emcee had the job of pulling it all together. He turned out be a pretty talented kid named Alex Winthrop from Justin's school – Grover Cleveland High. Justin had worked up a piano act in which he played a variety of short selections from Bach to Timberlake, tripped over his too long formal tails, fell off or missed his seat on numerous occasions, lost his hand inside the open grand piano and, as his finale, played America the Beautiful in the styles of Bach, Straus, Lawrence Welk and the Beetles. His constant patter kept the audience in stitches.

“We raised nearly a thousand dollars,” Justin offered as his first comment to his mother as she approached him backstage after the program. They shared quick pecks to the cheeks.

“You must be very proud. All your hard work has apparently paid off, big time. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. By the way, you’ll be happy to hear that *Nessie* is going to make a full recovery. It was a mild heart attack.”

“That is good news.”

“Now, moving on, are you going to introduce the guy holding back over there like a nervous Secret Service Agent protecting his charge, or do I go and handle it myself? Gerald, I assume.”

She turned toward the man and hitched her head. He walked to them.

“Gerald, my son, Justin. Justin, some guy who calls himself Gerald – Smith, if you’ll believe that.”

They offered hands for a prolonged, white-knuckle, shake.

“Once you two have sufficiently deformed each other’s hands, we can get on to other things.”

“They grinned sheepishly as they worked their throbbing fingers behind their backs.”

“Ma’s got a sixth sense,” Justin said addressing Gerald in a confidential manner.

“I’ve witnessed it on other occasions,” he came back. “This was the first time I’ve heard you play, Justin. Unbelievable for a kid who’s only, what, 27.”

It was worth chuckles all around. This guy just might have some redeeming features.

“So, mom and I usually celebrate after I play a gig. I assume you have been invited to be a part of it.”

“I have but like I told Carolyn, I really don’t want to intrude.”

“You will have no idea how much you didn’t want to intrude until my interrogation is complete later this evening.”

He turned to his mother.

“Did that sentence make any sense at all?”

"I have the idea the important, menacing, essence surfaced."

"If your inquisition skills match your grip, son, I surrender right now. How did you build so much hand strength?"

"Those 27 years of piano practice, and, *my word was interrogation*. The abject terror my very presence is clearly building within your subconscious, obviously morphed it up a notch or two. I think I like *inquisition* better. That implies the legitimacy of bamboo shoots and hot wax, right?"

Gerald looked at Carolyn and shrugged his shoulders.

"You said there was no way to prepare me for him. I yield to your wisdom."

"We are parked out on the street for a rapid getaway in case things didn't go well inside," she said.

It was a nice evening – a good first encounter. Privately, like a ventriloquist speaking through his dummy, Justin informed Gerald that if he ever hurt her in any way, he would snuff him out like the flame on a candle.

"I would expect no less from you," came the man's equally veiled response.

They exchanged nods and smiles, which confirmed the understanding.

When Gerald dropped them off at home, there was an awkward moment at the front door. Justin, reluctantly, sensed he was an unwanted third thumb – something new in his relationship with his mother.

"Well, this is embarrassing," he said, the reference apparently obvious – or not. "Gerald, old man, we forgot my piano so would you be a good chap and run back and fetch it for me."

Gerald, clearly puzzled, looked back and forth between them.

"He is pulling your leg, Gerald. It is his way of saying the inquisition is not yet over."

"I see. And how long may I expect this inquisition of yours to continue?"

"How many days are there left in our lives?"

Justin chuckled himself inside, pausing a moment

before closing the door.

“You got *ten* minutes, kids, before I sound the house alarm. *Ten!*”

Part of him wanted to peek – to see what went on between them. Most of him didn’t, so he moved toward his room. Although he honestly wanted his mother to get on with her life – he’d be in college in 18 months – he had never stopped to consider the personal ramifications of a new relationship. There would most likely come times when the kids would seek dark corners in which to talk, hand holding as they walked in the park, maybe even (shudder!) kissing. The characterization had begun as a humorous exercise, designed to occupy his time between the front hall and up the stairs to his room. Instead, it ended with a shudder, a Pay-Day, and loud music.

When he entered his teen years, his mother suggested that he keep his boy/girl activities to group outings until his Junior year. It was more than half way through his junior year. He had dated but not seriously. He enjoyed the company of girls, going more for a sense of humor, a penchant for justice, and an appreciation of the arts, than beauty. His friend, Winston, said that seemed perverted. According to his take on life, God had made girls to be girls and boys to be boys and intended for them to mix it up on that basis. Justin didn’t argue the point. Winston was free to mix on any basis he pleased. He requested the same right for himself and a non-intervention pact had been consummated.

Justin also understood that, although he and Winston had been close friends that year, they had way too little deep-down stuff in common to expect that to continue after graduation. It was one of those time-filling relationships, a keeping-from-being-bored relationship, and had nothing to do with any sort of commitment beyond that. The concept had even inspired an essay for sociology: *The importance of temporary relationships for teenagers*. When he read it in class, girls cried, and boys gave him the panting, drooling, thumbs up. Clearly, neither of them had grasped the point he was trying to make. Perhaps he should not have deleted the final line in his first draft: *Many relationships during high*

school are like practicing scales on the piano – they offer little in and of themselves but can have profound, positive influences later in life.

Nothing held Justin's attention and imagination as much as his hopes and wonders about what his future held. His father had worked thoughtfully at being a good model for him. Justin hoped to take it a huge step further and, in some way, become a grand model for all of humanity.

LAMAR – 7:

The Student Council had taken up the points Lamar had expressed several days earlier. Some of their ideas were quite clever like the stickers they had printed to be worn on the backs of shirts and backpacks in the building. One version read, 'Greet the next person you meet.' Predictably, that sometimes got changed to, 'Kiss, the next person you meet,' a fully acceptable response in many cultures.

As Lamar – no longer the mummy – walked the halls and a hand was raised in his direction, he put his finger to his lips and then pointed to a kid walking or standing alone. Everybody knew what he meant. Most, even tried to follow through. He understood it would not solve the problems of the world – by itself – but it was what he had to put out there.

Print and on-line publications continued to request interviews with him. Lamar hated that idea. He agreed to them only when Carmen could accompany him. In some magical way he found a measure of self-confidence when she was by his side. If what he had said was really important, then he figured it was his responsibility to be good for it – to own it and explain what he could. He would not do an interview if the journalist would not agree, up front, to keep sports and his personal future off limits.

The low point of his week came when he entered his English class one morning. While the students were gathering, the teacher called him to her desk.

"I have a transcript of the comments you gave to the assembly earlier in the week. As you can see I've marked grammatical corrections you will want to make if you offer it

again.”

He looked her in the face and intentionally spoke in a voice no one in the room could ignore.

“You missed the whole point of my remarks. How insensitive and out of touch can an educated human being be?”

He picked up his back pack and walked out of the room, heading for the principal’s office. A girl picked up the doctored transcript. One quick glance and she understood. She passed it around to others. Her comment to the teacher was simply, ‘disgusting’. A third weighed in, ‘words can be elegant and not fit your artificial rules, ma’am.’

The room was soon empty.

The principal’s office was soon full.

The document somehow made it to his desk. He read it to himself. He gave no visible response to the content but stood, walked to the front of his desk and leaned back. He folded his arms.

“Talk to me about this. No hand raising. Talk with me about what you’re feeling. Clearly you believe something is very wrong.”

Lamar chose to remain silent. He had already had his sixty seconds alone with Mr. Burton, so the stage had been set and the problem defined. He made it clear to the man that the only person he had encouraged to leave the room was himself. The discussion went on for half an hour. The longer it continued, the calmer, more rational and more focused it became. By the time Mr. Burton brought it to a close, some of the students were already asking how the basic misunderstandings between cultures – cultures that rubbed elbows every day in that building – could be bridged.

Lamar stood. I have just one thing to say – like another startin’ point maybe. I’ve been readin’ and it seems to me one of our worst enemies is believin’ there are absolutes when it come to how we believe and even simple things like how we talk. Mr. Burton’s way is correct in his world. My way is correct in my world. The big delusion is thinking we all live in the same world. I can see that it is important, in order to keep society functioning smoothly, that we all agree on some

standard way of communicating in formal matters. That's not what I objected to upstairs. I objected to being put down about what had been one of the most important moments in my life, so far. I just can't understand how anybody could really believe that *how* I went about stating my points was more important than those points I had to offer. There is somethin' really wrong with that kind of thinkin', and any school worth its salt should be promotin' just the opposite.

"Oh, one more thing, I will expect every one of you to be in detention with me after school today. We broke a rule. Sometimes rules need to be broke, but when we break one, we have to be willin' to take the consequence.

Serving detention meant Lamar missed a practice and that meant – by rule – he would be kept out the first ten minutes of the game that evening. Long before game time, the word was out – what he had done and said and the ten-minute suspension. Their opponent was good. So far that season they had split, one and one.

Every time Lamar entered the gym, the crowd cheered. That night they rattled the rafters. His plan was to just ignore whatever happened. In twenty minutes things would be back to normal – *or not*. He couldn't believe it. What he saw in the bleachers sickened him. He did notice it was not the students who were participating. That was heartening.

There were signs suggesting the coach should do with his head, that which most certainly was anatomically impossible. Some called him names. There were racial slurs. Others called for his resignation. There were hateful shouts and chants. It was, of course, all about the benching of *their* King of the Court. When GCHS *won*, 'they' reveled in 'their' win even though they had played absolutely no part in affecting the outcome. When GCHS *lost* a game, 'they' typically took it out on the coach – 'they' certainly took no responsibility for it.

Lamar was shocked and hurt. He was confused. Never in his worst nightmare would he have believed so many hateful people would apparently just show up to ruin the evening. He didn't remove his sweats. He climbed to the top row to the bench from which the loud speaker announcements

were made. The students quieted expecting something rational. The sign carriers upped the decibels, assuming the star was about to express his appreciation for their effort and support.

Alex, *The 5th*, handed him the mike. Lamar tried to calm the din. It would not be calmed. He began talking anyway.

“Hear me . . . hear me . . . please. . .”

It quieted considerably. He could be heard.

“Shut up and sit down, NOW! You are a disgrace to this revered basketball court. You are a disgrace to yourselves. Pass those terrible signs to the aisles, NOW! This is a basketball team. We have rules that each member respects and agrees to follow. Without rules and people willin’ to follow them we got nothin’ folks, nothin’ – we got riots, we got stealin’, we got the destruction of property and we got bodily harm and even killin’. The students here at Grover Cleveland High School believe in rules – in the rule of law. Either sit down and shut up or leave!”

The hush of all hushes commandeered the room. With obvious dismay and clear reluctance, signs began moving across the rows of people. Except for those who chose to leave – and several dozen did – the rest took their seats. The band struck up the fight song. Lamar made his way back down the steps and, to everybody’s bewilderment, left the floor by way of the door through which he had entered.

The savvy referee blew the game to order. At tipoff, the other team got the ball and things were underway. At ten minutes into the game, the Cleveland High coach called time out. The team gathered around him. They were already down by 14 points. The crowd stood and turned, all eyes on the spot from which they expected Lamar would return. Presently, they heard his unmistakable deep voice – already out on the floor – hands on his hips. He motioned to the bench.

“Come on guys,” he called. “You expect me to win this one all by myself?”

That was pretty much the way it happened – Lamar had 67 points in fifty minutes – a new school record – heck, a new conference record.”

MARIA – 7:

Maria's head performed lots of tricks that night but drifting off on its own was not one of them. Reading would not be the answer. Working on the essay would not be the answer. She decided to write a story – one that might organize her thoughts and, someday, serve a useful purpose for her younger brothers and sisters.

Buggly Dootsflappy was just a kid, learning how to add ($1+1=2$) and read the easiest of words (See *Sam. Sam had a cat. The cat was Kitty.*)

Buggly lived with his mother. He and his mother got along very well. Still, Buggly felt like he was all alone. He was shy. He had a hard time making friends. None of the others offered their friendship to him. He believed nobody liked him.

One night he made a big decision; if other kids did not like him, then he would not like them. His plan went even further. Not liking him was bad of them. Kids who were bad got punished. He was going to punish the *bad* kids who didn't like him.

He began stealing things from the bad kids. He began telling lies about the *bad* kids. He got the *bad* kids in trouble. When the kids found out what Buggly was doing, they stopped just ignoring him – they began being mean back at him.

About that time, a new kid started going to Buggly's school – he was called simply, Fats. He was bigger than the others and he, too, felt left out. He was slow with his school work and so clumsy that none of the kids picked him to be on their teams. Some called him names. Most just ignored him. Fats became unhappy and then angry.

When he tried to strike back, the other, smarter and stronger and more athletic kids defended themselves, hitting him and hurting him, and sent him off crying.

That made him even more angry. It made him determined to find some way to hurt other kids. He found kids that were not as strong as he was and began picking on them. Buggly was one of those kids. Fats hurt him afterschool. Fats took his lunch money before school. During school, Fats pounded his fist into his hand, indicating what Buggly was to be in for at the end of the day. It kept Buggly sad and frightened all day. His school work went downhill.

A second new boy started school. He was strong and smart and kind. He tried to make a friend of Buggly. Buggly was afraid to trust him. Eventually, he did, (because the new boy kept after him) and they began doing things together. They found out they had a lot in common and enjoyed being together. When the others saw how Buggly could be a good kid, they, too, began doing things with him.

Neither Buggly or Fats had a father in their life. In both homes the mother had to work two jobs to make ends meet. Interestingly, the boys turned out quite differently.

By the time Buggly was multiplying and dividing and writing stories, he was mostly a happy boy with a number of friends.

Nobody took time to become friends with Fats – that often happens with hard to like *older* kids. He grew angrier and angrier inside and began planning more

serious ways to hurt the other children – all those other children who had ignored him and refused to play with him. By the time he entered high school, life had taught him that people – especially, other kids – were unfriendly, hurtful and mean. Worse than that, they were so wicked as a lot, they didn't deserve to live. In the end, Fats did very bad things to a large group of kids – many of whom he didn't even know, personally.

Because, when he was still young, kids decided to do their best to make Buggly feel included as a part of their class, he gradually relaxed and gladly joined in. He changed from thinking he must be bad since everybody treated him badly, to thinking he must be a pretty good guy because so many of the other children included him in their lives.

There was a moral to the overly simplistic story – one she believed just might save humanity – but she decided not to state it, wanting the readers (and listeners) to think about it and figure it out all by themselves.

She felt better. Another night she'd try it out on her siblings and see if she were on the right track. It had been fun. It felt like it might even be important. Perhaps she'd become a writer. Perhaps someday something she would write would be so fantastic, it would save the world.

Now *that* was a fantasy she could fall asleep to.

* * *

A few nights later when she read the story to the younger kids at home, she was astounded at the insights little ones could figure.

"I never thought about bad kids being sad kids, too," one offered.

"It makes sense that loners might not want to be loners. I sure wouldn't want not to have friends. Huh! It's like

sometimes maybe it's more my fault than the bad kid's fault."

"I hate bullies, but it makes sense they got feelings, too. But I never thought about how all us other kids might have let it happen."

"Let?" Maria asked.

"You saying, '*made*' it happen, Maria?"

"*Made, helped, allowed* – something for us to think about, I suppose."

"There's a boy in my class everybody hates – Allen. He's always in trouble. Mama says I can't play with him for fear he'll hurt me or get me in trouble. I don't see how I can do the Buggly thing with him."

"Here's an idea," Maria offered. Explain to mama how you'd like to try to help, Allen, and ask her if you could invite him to our house after school sometimes. You would be plenty safe here and we'd all be around to keep anything from getting out of hand. If he asks why *here*, be honest with him: say that you and your family are afraid if you played with him out in the neighborhood, he would get you into trouble or hurt you, because that's the reputation he has built for himself. But, let him know we're alright with him coming to play here if he'll obey our rules."

"I'll try it. I really don't like him much, but I guess nobody should have to be all by himself in the world. In your story it sounds like that can turn unhappy kids into really bad kids."

"Go for it! I like what you just said. One thing I really liked was your implication that we don't have to like somebody in order to be helpful to them. It's just the right thing and doing it may someday save somebody from doing perfectly awful things."

"And, how can you know if you like somebody if you don't get to know him, huh?" another added.

"You're a really great story writer, Maria. When are you going to write us another one?"

"Yeah. Can I take this to school for our teacher to read to us?"

"You've always been quiet, Maria. Does that mean you're going to blow away a whole bunch of people

someday?”

That had come from Mateo, her eldest brother and suggested a tad bit more enthusiasm for devastation and destruction than Maria was comfortable with. Oh, to be able to slow down the testosterone drip in boys the way you could the saline drip in an IV.

“Of course, it doesn’t mean I’ll do that. For one thing, I have all of you, and every day of my life you all show me how much you need me – how I’m an important part of your lives.”

[‘*Doin’ the Buggly*’ – think that might catch on?]

JAMES – 7:

The question was not *how* – his house was a ready-made arsenal. The questions became *where* and *when*. *Where* would be determined by *who* and *when* by *where*.

He became uncharacteristically reflective and wondered if there was anybody out there in the world he really cared about. Mrs. Galey was okay for a teacher. She treated him well and usually acknowledged his presence in her classroom. He had nothing in particular against the MC kid at school – Alex Win-something. For an ever-smiling chubby kid with a bob cut and his belt cinched up above his navel, he seemed ok. James retained one vivid memory about him from early in his freshman year. Walking down the hall one morning before school, dutifully being the dependable loudmouth, he was known to be, he met Alex who was wearing a Panama hat.

“I like the hat,” James said without thinking.

“Here. Take it. It’s yours. It seems we share great taste in head gear.”

James stopped and stood there, stunned, as Alex removed the hat and with some care, arranged it on James’ head.

“It looks like it belongs there. Enjoy?”

He moved on down the hall.

Three things James admired about Alex were that he never seemed to take anything too seriously, was a fine self-promoter, and clearly had the uncanny ability to let other

people allow him to share their limelight.

Self-promotion: pro and con. It had been the title of something James had written once. For what purpose or class, he did not remember. For the record, he concluded it was a bad thing – *con*. People should be recognized by other people without requiring a sales pitch – without any interview for, ‘person worthy of recognition’. On the other hand, he had to wonder if he had been a better self-promoter, might he have suckered in a few friends or companions or whatever, who might have forced life to share some of its promised, heartening attributes.

His saddest memories were not the ones that relived the non-relationship with his mother or father, the tormenting by the kids in Middle-school, the painful and degrading shoving back and forth between gangs of bullies, or even the back-alley beatings. The saddest memories were all about the terrible, relentless, *isolation*. There had been days he sought out beatings solely for the element of human contact. The only times in his life he had permitted himself to cry, were in his bed, at night, as he struggled to understand why it was his lot to go through life as an island with no friends or associates – nobody who indicated they cared one whit about him. It still happened sometimes – the nighttime tears. Until one had experienced it, there was no way of understanding how devastating and humiliating – eviscerating – it was to know you were invisible and worthless in a world where you were surrounded by happy human beings, chatting and laughing and regularly interacting with each other – all that happening just out of reach on the other side of the veil.

One of his proudest accomplishments in life was that, through all the sadness and pain and turmoil with which he had to cope every day, he had never once turned to drinking. The liquor cabinet was kept loaded and never locked. His father had offered. James turned it down. Perhaps it had become symbolic of his inner strength. More likely, he figured it had to do with maintaining control. Liquor dulled the senses. Liquor loosened the inhibitions. Liquor allowed, if not encouraged, the loss of control. There were few aspects of his world he could control in a positive way, so when he found

he could control his sobriety, he found one of the few sources of security and self-esteem he had in life.

When he was a young boy, he discovered the easiest way to get and maintain attention – from kids and grownups – was to make one of them angry. The fodder for that was often proving them wrong, making them look foolish, catching them in a lie, realistically comparing them in a negative way to something they could not refute. As a young kid he could run fast and usually avoid the pain, which typically accompanied being caught. By seventh grade that possibility no longer existed. Being slow of foot but not slow of wits, James soon gave up that approach.

By that time, however, a seemingly insurmountable problem had set in – he had managed to make everybody hate him; the creepy kid from Beaumont Park. He soon found that being hated was not typically enough to garner attention. In Junior High, he turned to activities that got the attention of the police. Finally, when a judge threatened to remove him from his home, send him to Juvenile Hall, and throw away the key, he figured it was time to investigate some other route.

At that point, he tried to just settle for what he seemed to have and master the art of loneliness. To some extent he was successful. As he roamed the halls offering his non-stop, under-the-breath stream of noxious comments, he struck a compromise between saying what was on his mind and the actual confrontation of other humans. If they didn't hear, that might be their fault. He had put it out there. It was a weak argument, but he had made it work since entering high school a year and a half before.

The time for games was over – he figured he had exhausted the supply. Anyway, he had tired of them. People sucked. Relationships sucked. Life sucked. More than merely sucking – that is, being useless, hurtful, frightening, impossible to understand, and distasteful – people had intentionally hurt him every day of his life – and it *had* been intentional. When he stood there in their path attempting to chat with them and they walked around him without so much as a nod or a, “Hi. How ya doin?”, that *had* to be intentional. Intentional hurtfulness. When that happened to other people – getting

beat up, getting run down – the principal or the Courts punished the offenders. It became one more measure of proof that life, intentionally, had it out for him and, more than that, society sanctioned it. *Fair* did not apply to him.

James believed that he had given people more than sufficient opportunities to make amends – to nod when they passed, to chuckle at his jokes, to say they were sorry when they jostled him or stepped on his feet. No one had taken advantage of his offer of amnesty for wrong deeds in the past. Since neither the school nor the courts would come through for him – charge those who, ‘willingly and with malice, caused physical harm or mental distress to any citizen’ [from the City Criminal Code], he would see to it, himself. The vigilante tradition was old, revered, and still alive in this country.

There were no alternatives when it came to Whom – his entire life experience had dictated that. And Whom, most conveniently, dictated Where. With those things settled, *When*, became the easiest question of all.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

February 23rd

AMY – 8:

The family had not yet assembled for breakfast when Amy joined her mother in the kitchen.

“Need to be off to school early. The principal selected a dozen of us to serve on a brain-storming committee to come up with ideas about making Cleveland High the most student-friendly school in America. I take that as a real honor and already have lots of ideas. I don’t know anybody else in the group so I’m thinking there will great opportunities for us to share unique perspectives. Tell dad and the boys I love them.

She pressed a kiss against her mother’s cheek and left.

JUSTIN – 8:

Justin and his mother had just sat down for breakfast.

“I think I’m a little nervous about my recital, ma. Did dad have any secret about how to get rid of that?”

“He had a check list. One was Mechanical: it meant could he play the piece free from any wrong notes. Another was, Emotion: did he understand the feeling he wanted to convey. And third was Connection: had he made the proper connection between the Mechanical and the Emotional – would his presentation touch the hearts of his audience in the ways he intended. When he could check off all three he said all trepidation ceased, he was filled with confidence, and

should the audience not like it, they were just stinky faces.”

Justin chuckled. “I guess I got it then. Check, check, and check.”

“I’m so proud of you, Justin.”

“Me, too, if that’s not out of line.”

“It is never out of line to be proud of yourself. It pleases me no end that you are developing such a robust, positive, self-concept.

“Back at you, mom. I’ve had to work overtime on it, but I think I’m finally getting you there, too. And, for some unfathomable reason that reminds me that I have to get to school by eight – Principal Burton put me on a committee to improve student life. I’m pretty psyched about getting to help. Got lots a ideas. Gotta trot!”

He pushed back from the table to stand.

“Love you, Justin.”

“Love you, Mom.”

Kisses.

LAMAR – 8:

“Pancakes! Great. How did you manage time?”

“I taken a month off from cleanin’ the office building, nights, so we can spend more time together. In a few months you be startin’ your own life out in the big world and our times together’ll become few and far between.”

“Only if I accept a scholarship from some place far away. I’m still considerin’ *Murphy College* here in the city.”

“Let me put it another way, son. The time come in every young man’s life when he need to move on from his mama and prove himself out in the world. It’s that time, Lamar. I know you really want to play at *Medford* and that’s where I want you to play, too. You decided what you gonna study?”

“I’m leaning toward either law enforcement or Social Work. It’ll largely depend on the length and size of the scholarship I can get. I’ve decided to hold out for four years.”

He looked at the wall clock.

“Gotta go. Principal Burton and I are sort of heading up

a new committee of kids to come up with ways to make our High School so friendly that nobody could ever feel left out even if they tried.”

He spread his wonderful smile, kissed her on her forehead and left.

MARIA – 8:

Maria had to be at school early, so it was just she and her parents at the breakfast table.

“This is nice – just the three of us – like the old, old times,” she said.

“Lots has happened since those days,” her mother said.

“You mean *lots* as in four new mouths to feed and dress and send to school?” her father said pretending gruffness.

His breaking smile belied his protest.

It didn’t call for a response.

“There is a new committee at school. The principal set it up. I can’t believe that out of 3,000 kids he wanted me to be part of it – just twelve all together. He made it up of kids that don’t know each other. He says he hopes that will mix new perspectives together and with that, produce fantastic new ideas about improving acceptance and becoming a friendlier student body. I guess I do know a lot about that. I’ve always sort of been on the fringe – never pushed away but often not really invited in. I have some good ideas to share.”

She stood and kissed each parent. They offered lingering hugs – a hug from that family was always lingering.

JAMES – 8:

James awoke with a headache. He had experienced several recently. No matter, he was well into implementing his plan. He had laid out the equipment the night before. For clothing, he opted for his black sweat suit, black sneakers, black leather gloves, and a black hoodie. It was an ideal outfit for his needs. There were two deep pockets in the pants – the left for two extra, 75 round clips and the right for the Glock.

The pants were baggy, so nobody would suspect he was concealing an AK with a bump stock inside the left leg. He could extend the elastic waistband with his left thumb and gain immediate access to the weapon with his right hand, which he would withdraw in firing position. He had practiced dozens of times and had the maneuver down to four seconds. The Glock was for his personal use at the end. Everything about the plan was exciting. His heart beat fast. Shallow breaths came quickly.

He had contemplated leaving behind a detailed written explanation but figured if people were so stupid not to understand, they didn't deserve such an epistle. Some mornings he entered the school building through the outside entrance to the boiler room. Although it was kept locked, he and Zeek had a secret knock. The ultimate advantage that morning was the absence of metal detectors.

Once inside, he made Zeek promise to stay in the boiler room until at least nine o'clock.

It was seven. A few teachers and a handful of janitors were present, but the huge old building was virtually empty. James made his way to the second floor without meeting a soul. He located locker number 'W-225' – it belonged to the MC-kid with the mike. He fed a folded note in through the louvers – *'Stay off three until after nine. You're okay. You'd always nod or say hi when we pass. Thanks, and thanks for the hat. I still have it.'* He didn't sign it figuring that would not be necessary.

James then made his way up the back stairs to the third-floor meeting room. His sources had revealed that was where the dozen goodie goodies were going to be meeting that morning. Being on the outside, he had no idea what it was about. He went directly to the unused closet at the rear of the room, locked the door from the inside – surely a fire code violation just to be able to do that, he thought – and took a seat on the floor to wait.

He felt an amazing sense of relief – a kind of high he had seldom known. After fifteen years of floundering his way through a world that clearly didn't want him as a part of it, finally, he understood what he had to do. Peace was just

minutes away. There were just two, concrete, things left to accomplish. Presently he heard the students arriving – talking, joking, laughing. Once things quieted, James understood the meeting had been called to order and *he* had been called to achieve his destiny. *He would be remembered!*

* * *

Within minutes, Social Media, and local and national news outlets were announcing the massacre.

>13 SLAUGHTERED IN STILL ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING

>SHOOTER TAKES HIS OWN LIFE AFTER KILLING 12 SUTDENTS AND PRINCIPAL.

>CITY MOURNS LOSS OF STUDENTS AND ADMISISTRATOR

>SHOOTER FROM SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY

>POLICE CHIEF DECRY S FAILED SECURITY AT SCHOOL BUILDING

>SENATOR CALLS FOR MORE SEVERE JUVENILE JUTICE PROCEDUES

>GUN ADVOCATES DEMAND ARMING TEACHERS

Each headline, in its banality, screamed ignorance about the roots of the problem and, therefore, indifference about finding the solution. Nobody – no lawmaker, no editor, no educator, no pundit – could fail to understand the roots of the problem, if, for just one day, they would take time to walk the corridors of our nation’s schools inside James’ skin.

The only meaningful headline came a few days later in the *Beacon*, the *Grover Cleveland High School* paper. The byline was credited to *Stephen Redding*.

GCHS STUDENTS ARE DETERMINED TO GO FORWARD WITH OUR NEW ‘NOBODY SHALL FEEL ALONE’ PROGRAM, AIMED AT BUILDING AN ALL-INCLUSIVE STUDENT BODY.

Few outside the student body would see, let alone, read the article. Few outside the student body would understand it even if they read it.

The article contained one passage that stood out as important above the rest.

“All of us, adults and students, tend to put the blame for such conflagrations mostly on the shoulders of the ‘bad guy’ and his mentors, while fully ignoring our possible personal responsibilities. What if two dozen or ten or even just one of us would have reached out early in his life and insisted that James allow us to include him, honestly, in our lives and school activities. Might that have turned things around for him? Perhaps we need to examine our own selfish oversight, rather than searching the boy’s psyche or unfavorable living situation. Next time you trod the halls, ask yourself, does he feel left out? Does she live the unhappy life of a forced-to-be loner? The offer of a friendly smile, a meaningful nod, a fifteen second stop-and-chat session, might make a huge difference in the lives of people who are never included. This reporter sincerely doubts that a kid – even one with mental problems – would be inclined to mow down a room full of people who regularly and honestly present themselves to him as friends.”

And then the sidebar announcement in the far-right column:

Thirteen of the fourteen who lost their lives will lie in state in Redding Memorial Gym, from ten a.m. Thursday until ten p.m. Friday. The caskets will remain closed. Individual funeral arrangements and further information will be posted on the main bulletin board on the first floor as they become available. Classes have been canceled until March third.

END NOTE: The causes of, and effective solutions for any social problem (including the school shooter) are never simple. Often, however, reasonable causes and simple

solutions are ignored in a defensive rush to make sure the blame is firmly attached elsewhere – on parents, bad genes, horrible teachers, lack of funds, unsuitable and outdated laws, inadequate mental health services, easy access to contributing material, unprincipled manufacturers or suppliers. Not denying any of those, the author hopes his story has brought focus on perhaps the simplest and most effective, long-term solution – *sincere inclusion by one's peers*. School shooters may or may not be mentally or emotionally incompetent, come from fatherless or abusive homes, grow up in poverty, or have been taught to hate and retaliate from early ages, but you can bet the farm they all feel excluded, disconnected, and helpless where relationships with their peers are concerned. That depiction focuses on the barriers others – we – erect against them. So, merely focusing on 'fixing' *them* will do little or nothing to rectify the situation. The author calls it *Active Compassion* – peers, regularly reaching out to include the lonely, the shy, the obviously sad and the easily rejected. Can you just imagine the cultural shift that will occur when – as in this story – the 75,000,000 school children in our country mobilize as eager, fully involved, volunteer 'therapists' – aka, simply living as the compassionate, inclusive, human beings most parents work hard to raise in the first place – or do we, really? This is not a short-term solution. There are undoubtedly some will-be-shooters out there right now who have already been pushed beyond a reasonable limit that smiles and nods and attempts at inclusion will not rescue, but we must start the process. Down the road, I believe we will understand it has been unfortunate to lump school shootings by teens in with other kinds of mass shootings. Think milieu.

[Probably since the dawn of man, it has been observed that males react to frustration and anger more violently than females. That does not imply that girls are not also devastated by isolation and rejection.]

--TDG

“DO THE BUGGLY”