

The Edge: A diary of terror



By David Drake and
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A psychological thriller for adults and young adults

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Fiction for adults and young adults

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III

Chapter One: IN THE BEGINNING

It had become an altogether uncomfortable, chilly and foggy, late October evening. The wind whipped at the limbs and power lines, and discomfited any person bold or inane enough to brave it.

Up above, light from the slip of a moon was rapidly losing its battle against the darkness. The defenseless, soft, pink and fuchsia bands of beauty lingering quietly and unprotected above the horizon had abruptly become fair game for turbulent, darkening clouds, which foretold the restless night that lay ahead.

Down below, the fog was rolling in on its nightly journey up the little river, spilling inland onto the banks and even billowing as high as the gently arching walkers' bridge, which spanned the water and connected the little cities' downtown district with the upscale residential neighborhood to the west.

The lone figure of a teenage boy, who was hurrying his wheelchair up the slope toward the center of the bridge on his way home from the library, disappeared into the bank of dense, damp mist. He paused at the top, leaning slightly forward as he squinted down toward the far end, his eyes trying unsuccessfully to pierce the thick, gray, haze.

His breathing became rapid, mirroring his quickening heart. Who or what had that been just ahead of him? He had seen it moving in his direction only to suddenly reverse itself, turning and hurrying away.

He gripped those damp, cold wheels tightly. As he had come to understand on so many occasions those past several

months, they were his sole source of security. He wanted to know who it was and yet he didn't. Such near encounters had been occurring far too often – the shadowy stranger's appearances and disappearances, and the immediate and thoroughgoing terror that predictably invaded every corner of his being.

He had formulated a question and found himself chasing the answer through his fear, while awake during days, and through his restless, terror filled nightmares during sleep: Was it a malevolent stranger who chose to *taunt* him just out of reach, or was it an illusion or hallucination, which his mind would not allow to define itself in any meaningfully form? He truly believed his mind was inching its way ever closer to the edge – ever closer to a state of irreversible insanity.

* * *

MY JOURNAL: DAY ONE

I have concluded there can only be one answer. The mind that has served me so well during my first fifteen years of life is slipping away into the deep dark abyss of insanity.

Not being certain, at this point, if I have really ever been sane – if sane means average, typical, well-adjusted, happy, confident, and such things – I have questions about what signs I should be seeking for confirmation one way or the other.

Since my birthday, six months ago, I have begun being startled by things that should not startle a boy my age. There have always been some of those – my irrational fear of the barber pole and of the American flag, and my reported tantrums at four when I refused to wear my sailor suit – but there are more things recently.

Maybe startled is the wrong term although I resist using terms such as paranoid because that's like admitting I'm already crazy – and I don't want to already be crazy. More than anything right now, I want to be – I need to be – fully and completely sane until I can get a few of these baffling and terrifying parts of my life sorted out or solved or understood. That last thing is most important – just to make sense of all these things.

Take this evening for example: I was on my way back from the library. It was later than usual. The sun had just set and the fog had already begun to roll up the river. As I reached the top of the pedestrian bridge I saw a figure coming toward me up the slope where I sat. I became panicked through and through with fear. Why should that have been my response? I meet people on that bridge almost every time I cross it. Thinking back on it I have to wonder which really came first: seeing that figure approaching me or the feeling of panic, which I then assigned to the figure. Regardless, when it turned and went back the way it had come, I was certainly convinced of its bad intentions toward me. It disappeared in the fog. I wonder if the fog had not been there if it still would have disappeared. Some supernatural Spector haunting me from some other realm. See, I quickly sink into fully irrational interpretations.

One thing is certainly real – the fear, the discomfort, the panic. I guess that's three things. I don't understand why. I once read something in a philosophy book. It said that often 'why' is the wrong question word, that it should be replaced with 'how' – how did something come to pass rather than why. 'How' supposedly leads to more useful, fact based, answers, where 'why' allows opinion to masquerade as fact. I will try to begin asking how it all came about.

Anyway, all of that is why (smile) I have decided to keep this journal. The title is tentative – My Final Days of Sanity. It will be nice if in the finished version, 'final' will be replaced by 'continuing' or 'newfound' or 'everlasting'. I hope that seeing everything here in black and white will help me understand – see patterns, sort real from unreal, in some way diminish this fear and feeling of dread that constantly hangs over me – interlaced throughout my entire being, really. There are times my head feels like it will burst. There are times I can even understand how young people can be moved to take their own lives. I dislike clichés, but if there is such a thing as 'hell on earth', I am certainly living it.

If I slip over the edge there are a multitude of things that need to be set down here – just the basic things so those who may read it later as they try to untangle my collapsed state of mind may understand how things began and how they

have found horrendous ways to follow me and plague me into my middle teen years.

First things first, I suppose. I'm Ricky – well Cedrick Anderson Wilford according to my birth certificate (and there is a very odd and possibly disturbing story behind that document. I'll find time to describe that later.). Mine is one of those names that sounds like it should have 'the second' or 'the fourth' trailing along after it. No such thing for me. I suppose that makes me a one and only. If it does, I like that. I have no desire to be just like anybody else.

Dr. Wilson (my shrink, who I refused to continue seeing a few months back) said that was both good and bad. It was good that I wanted to be my own person. It was bad in that it could allow me to become so different from and indifferent to other kids that few of them would want to associate with me. Not sure I'd want to associate with me either, but that's another one of those 'more later' topics. At any rate, I really have no friends in the usual sense.

I'm a good kid. I never get into trouble. I do my school work – very well actually. Learning has always been very easy for me. I read a lot. I hope to be a writer someday. I love to play with words – big words that I can use here, but wouldn't try to use when conversing meaningfully with most other people. My English teacher says my writing is often yellow – she means I use fancy words way too often. I show respect to my elders. I am helpful – in fact, I try to be more helpful than I'm allowed to be around here – here being the fifteen room, three story, stone and roughhewn wood house, which is set far back from the street among dozens of other fifteen room houses in one of Springfield's most fashionable neighborhoods.

This seems like a good place to talk about my family. My father, Jonathan, (he doesn't like me to call him anything but 'father') recently had his fortieth birthday. He darkens his graying temples with some 'youth in a bottle' concoction, as if that will somehow actually keep him young. Playing ball or Frisbee with me or jogging along beside me on my morning wheelchair sprint around the block would do a better job, but he's never seemed to make that connection. He is a very successful lawyer – in practice with his father, my grandfather

(well, another of those pesky ‘needs further explanation’ things, which seem so prevalent in my life). Father never married – clearly, still another topic for later.

He treats me very well. Harsh words never flow between us. We have good conversations over meals. We ask about each other’s days and we both listen with genuine interest. If anything, he overprovides for me. How can I say this? Father is not a warm sort of person. He doesn’t hand out hugs or arms around the shoulders or pats on the back. When I was small, he would let me sit close to him on the couch while he read books to me in the evening. I taught myself to read when I was three, but didn’t admit to it until I went through the reading program in first grade. It was the only time I could enjoy being close to him. I liked to share his warm and feel his heart beating when I laid my head against his chest. He’d let me rest my hand on his leg. Understand, I have never for one moment doubted that father loves me.

Abby is our maid and cook. I’m guessing she’s in her mid-sixties. She just gushes hugs and kisses – even to guys my age. I like that. When I look back on things, it has really been Abby and Milton – the butler/housekeeper – who have raised me. Milton is 66. He makes no bones about his age the way women seem to. I never got that. You are what you are – accept it or get over it and keep going, that’s been my philosophy – again probably more influenced by Milton than father.

I remember when I was five or so and I’d complain to Milton at bedtime that I thought having to sleep at night was a huge waste of time. He said I had a choice: either lay awake and fret over it or go to sleep and get it over with. I’ve applied that to lots of things in my life. Milton is a wise man with a liberal arts education and a live and let live philosophy.

My ‘father’ thing and my life in a wheelchair are connected so I’ll try and deal with them together here toward the beginning.

I was born to my mother while my dad – not my father, you see – was away at war. When he came back he suffered from a severe mental disorder – PTSD. It was so severe that he had to be hospitalized for years, or so I’m told. (My paranoia showing through?) I lived with mom. Dad was prone

to violent outbursts so after a while, upon his return from war, he wasn't allowed to visit me. I only really knew him as the man in the soldier uniform in the picture frame that sat on the table beside the couch. I think I remember that, although it might be something I have been told.

When I was not quite three, mom was pushing me across an intersection in my stroller one morning when a car hit us – a hit and run. Mom was killed and I was severely injured. On the good side, I survived and only have one lasting reminder of the tragedy – that's the bad side – my legs were damaged in such a way that they stopped growing. (There is a good part to that, also, and I'll get to it later.) I can't remember back to the days when I could walk.

With no mother and a father who was incapable of caring for me, I am told that I was placed in an orphanage. I have virtually no visual memories of my short life there – of the place itself, of the other children, or the people who took care of me. What remains is one horrific, nebulous, emotional memory associated with that time or place or experience or people – how am I to know which or what? It sits like a heavy, ill-defined dark lump in the center of my chest. It is the ultimate sense of emptiness. Most of the time I am able to keep it out of mind, but whenever something reminds me of that time it returns. It's manifesting itself now, as I write. It grows inside me like a rapidly inflating, dark colored balloon pushing against my lungs and heart, making me fear both will collapse. My breathing becomes shallow and my heart races. It is visibly rippling my T-shirt right now as I sit here at my desk. It will pass, but my ribs will ache and my breathing will remain shallow for hours. I have never asked about the place – the orphanage. Why would I choose to reignite such a terrifying reaction? Even my shrink stopped bringing it up out of fear, I believe, my reaction could be life threatening to me.

I said there was an upside to my physical handicap. It is not really accurate that my legs cannot grow – but do so at an agonizingly slow pace and only in circumference, not length – the muscle and flesh grow, and the bones do not. I'm told there are fewer than a dozen known cases like mine.

The doctors had a choice; amputate my legs at three or encourage them to continue growing, through physical therapy

and electrical stimulation, so when I was older – fifteen or so – the upper parts would be large enough to provide substantial stumps that could cradle artificial limbs. It gave promise of walking as an older teen and adult. That was the decision that was made. Although they remain no more than eighteen inches long – groin to heel – and are fully incapable of supporting my weight, up next to my body they now measure thirteen inches in circumference. At fourteen inches, I'm 'go' for the operation. This will sound crazy, but I have never looked forward to anything as much as the day the surgeons remove my lower legs.

Bear with me. Here my life gets complicated.

My father – Jonathon – heard about my situation, apparently just several months after I went to the orphanage. He came to visit me (I don't remember). For some reason, he was taken with me. (I'm told I was adorable! I hope the girls still think I am!) Perhaps it was sorrow or pity for me initially, but like I said, I have no doubt that whatever the original attraction, it quickly grew into love.

I have never asked why he was interested in adding a child to his single life at that time. Milton slipped once and indicated it might have something to do with an inheritance clause in grandfather's will – father had to have a child in order to get it, or some such thing. Carrying on the family name or some such thing, maybe. Anyway, six months later – according to my 'new and revised' birth certificate – he adopted me. My last name had been Anderson. In my new name he kept that as my middle name. I'm pleased he did that. Apparently, I had no middle name. Cedrick is a Wilford family name going back generations. If my first name had to be changed – and I really don't understand why that had to be – I'm pleased about that choice, as well. (I think I remember having been called, Timmy, maybe, but have never pressed the issue. Perhaps I will.)

I have learned it is unusual for a single man to be allowed to adopt a child. I believe, as lawyers, he and grandfather had the four things that had been necessary: legal knowledge, family prestige, a flawless reputation, and wealth. It may have also been related to my physical condition – there wouldn't be many people who would be willing to adopt a

cripple. (I hate that word!)

I have wondered if my physical situation is the reason my father has never married – not wanting to saddle a wife with all my problems. I choose not to believe that – well, most of the time. I prefer to believe he is ‘married’ to his work and wants to spend his free time with me. He dates, but I seldom meet the women in his life. It could be that he doesn’t want me to get attached to any of them and then have them leave – that’s Milton’s take on it. I’m certain that it isn’t because he’s ashamed of me. Never for a single second have I ever had reason to believe he is not proud of me.

I am a sophomore in high school and I’m on the school newspaper staff. Several of my articles have won awards from the state high school paper association. Eventually, I want to write stories and books – great books that leave the reader with something more than having just waded through a pleasing or entertaining story. Before that, there will be college. Like I have said, I love to learn so I am eager for college to become a part of my life.

I often picture myself walking across the campus, free of my wheelchair. Nobody will ever know what a wonderful thing is happening when they see me, but I know I will be filled with great joy every single time I take a step.

Okay, that should take care of the important things from my background. Rereading it, I see it feels a whole lot more upbeat than I really feel most of the time. I suppose that may be the first sense of hope this journal has provided. Hmm?

My life is plagued by what my shrink used to call my ‘monsters’. I don’t think of them that way. I feel like I’m really being followed. Said like that, I suppose it isn’t all that scary, but it is scary – terribly frightening, in fact. What I mean is, being followed by a real person has to be better than being followed by a hallucination or delusion. A person should be easy to confront and come to understand. Mental aberrations, on the other hand, could remain out of reach forever.

As best I can remember it started soon after I came to live with father. I had my fourth birthday here and have a few vague memories about it. My original home was quite poor as I understand it. I doubt if I had many toys. It was probably a challenge for mom to just put food in my stomach. There may

have been some pension or something from the army, from dad – I don't know. I've heard bits and pieces of things. Nobody claims to know much about my life back then. I'm not sure if that's the truth or if they are shielding me from something. If they are, it must have been something truly horrific. I think mom took in washings and did ironing for people. She may have kept other families' kids while their moms worked. I'm not sure how much of that is fact and how much is supposition on my part. I've read that if you tell something as if it's true enough times you begin to believe it. Regardless, I do know that the smell of a still warm, freshly ironed shirt offers a very comfortable, secure feeling for me.

Back to that four-year-old party. I do remember that while I was struggling to blow out the candles, Abby abruptly picked me up out of my chair and took me up to my room. There was a rush about it. Perhaps some loud voices in the background. There was no explanation. Milton followed almost immediately with cake and several presents for me to open – diversions I assume, now. The feelings that are still with me about all that are more about how odd it all seemed rather than that I was actually frightened. Looking back, it was at least bizarre if not something more. I have no memory about father's role in any of it.

Perhaps a year later I had accompanied Abby to the grocery one morning. As we were unpacking the car back home I saw a stranger standing across the street. When I pointed him out to her she hurried me up the walk and into the house. I remember some comment about staying away from homeless people. I wasn't sure what a homeless person was, but I didn't pursue it since it clearly upset Abby so much.

One day when I was ten, I found father's den door open a crack. He wasn't home. I entered, even though I knew it was off limits to me. His den is on the first floor and has its own outside entrance. I apparently surprised somebody – an intruder – who was going through father's file cabinet. Without turning around to look at me he hurried out the back door and across the lawn. Something about him sent me into a panic. I began screaming and turned myself back into the hall, propelling my chair out the front door and into a power-driven tumble down the six porch steps. It knocked me out. I woke up

in a hospital. Father's face was looking down at me when I came to. I remember he was both smiling and furrowing his forehead. I thought that was a very odd combination to be wearing on one face all at the same time.

I was unable to say why I had been so terrified. I couldn't describe the man. I remember saying, "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry, Cedrick?" father asked losing the smile and exaggerating the furrows.

I didn't know for sure how to answer.

"I know I wasn't supposed to be in there."

"The only reason for that rule was so you wouldn't disorganize things in there that need to be kept organized. When you return home, I'll take you on a guided tour of the room. I just hadn't taken time to realize you are old enough now to keep your hands to yourself. I suppose I should be the one saying, 'I'm sorry'.

Nothing more was ever said about my intrusion into the den. Later, I did get the tour. It was basically the most boring room I had ever been in – writs and depositions and contracts and letters written in legalize. A computer with no games on it. There were shelves filled with large, thick, heavy, unattractive books set in tiny print and not a picture or a story in the lot of them. It was not the sort of place that held any interest for a ten-year-old boy. I did eye the big desk thinking it would make a great hiding place during my occasional games of hide-and-seek with Milton.

Only on that one occasion – the time of the tour – did father ever ask me about the intruder. I described him as best I could, but I could feel the fear welling up inside me all over again. I related that to him – I was clearly panicked at the moment – and he didn't pursue the conversation. I remember mentioning shoulder length, dark hair and a head band. It was mostly just a form that had flashed through ten startled seconds of my life.

That was, however, when Dr. Wilson, a psychiatrist, entered my life. We talked weekly for several years. I didn't dislike him, but he wasn't the sort I would have invited to a party. He wanted to talk about my fears. I didn't want to talk about my fears – that only made me more fearful since neither he nor I had any idea what I was afraid of. He did bring up

some things that led me to investigate parts of my early life to which I had not been privy. (More later.)

In the end, Milton became my best resource. He is an honest man and sees potential in me that I don't believe anybody else does. He is the one who always saw to putting me to bed when I was little. If father was home – which he often wasn't in the evening – he would come into my room after Milton got me situated and sit on the side of my bed and we'd talk for several minutes. I remember once I thought he was going to lean down and give me a kiss on my forehead – Milton always did that when I was younger – but instead, he reached out with his index finger and brushed an eyelash from my cheek. I liked feeling him touch me, but was deeply disappointed. It's odd how one's hopes can be raised and then dashed all in the same instant.

I have never let myself be bothered by my father's lack of physical contact or outward affection. Like I continue to say, I have no doubt he loves me.

Back to Milton. When father is present, Milton is staid and formal and maintains his professional aloofness. When father is not present he is everything I wish my father could be – we play catch, he taught me how to throw a Frisbee and use a lasso, we play checkers and chess, throw darts, we kid each other about the music we each like. On the evening of my 13th birthday he came into my room with a book about growing up things for boys. He asked me if I any questions about such things. I had lots, and felt comfortable chatting with him about the topic. We talked on for several hours. I've decided there is a special sort of bond built between a boy and the man who shares the facts of life with him. It is immediate and lasts forever. I am glad it had been him because I'm not at all sure I would have mustered the nerve to talk with father about it. (I had never thought about that until just now.)

To this day, I'm not sure if father had given Milton that task or if Milton had taken it upon himself, suspecting father would overlook it. I suppose it doesn't matter. Only one question remains unanswered: Will I ever get close enough to a female to use any of that fascinating information?

From time to time I would grill Milton about things in my past. Often, he would offer straight forward answers – never

elaborated. Sometimes he would say I needed to be older and would suggest an age at which I should ask again. I always did and he always knew I would. He was true to his word about answers.

When I was fourteen I became interested in the how and why of my adoption. I set down a list of well-organized questions for Milton. We went through the list item by item until I was satisfied. He didn't have some of the information I wanted, but what he had, he shared. I sometimes wonder if he feels like he is caught in the middle between father and me. I know he is fiercely loyal to him – well, and to me, also, of course. It was never my intention to put him on the spot, but time after time I can see that I have.

I learned from Milton that my adoption had been contested by my mother's brother – my uncle. It appeared that only happened after he learned some wealthy attorney was seeking to adopt me. I suspect he did it for leverage hoping to get a substantial payment if he'd drop the suit. Whether that was successful or not, I don't know. I doubt if it is something Milton would know. I did learn my uncle's name – Carl Barton. So, mom's maiden name had been Barton, I imagine. Milton says I had no living grandparents on mom's side. He doesn't know about my father's side. I'm also not sure why my uncle's 'claim' on me was denied. I'd think a relative would have first dibs in that sort of a situation.

On Memorial Day, my father takes me to visit my mother's grave. It is in a very nice cemetery with a high wall around it and closely trimmed grass. The headstones are all flat with brass plaques, which bear just the essential information. She was not even thirty when she died. The visits seem important to him. It's the only time I ever see his eyes well up as if he were going to cry. He never does. I don't either. I don't understand if his reaction of sadness is for her – having been killed – or for me – having been left alone in the world. I'm guessing for me. I suppose I feel guilty about my own lack of an emotional reaction, but I really remember very little about her. I have a picture on my night stand, but that's really my only image memory of her. I like to think that I love her, but how can you really love somebody you don't know? She gave me life. I suppose that should be enough. Could

that be a source of guilt that may be triggering things deep inside me?

I don't know much about my biological dad, either. During the past few months, I've become interested in that and plan to do some searching on the web to see what I may be able to find.

It is time for bed. I have school tomorrow. I'm not sure how often I will write things in here – as I feel the need, I suppose. Dr. Wilson had me keep a diary for a while. Once he figured out I only wrote things I thought he'd like to hear, he had me stop. Soon after that I stopped going to see him. I intend to be honest here.

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Chapter Two

ESCAPE, AND 'NUN' TOO SOON!

Early on, Ricky became aware that his deformed body was disgusting to the other boys, so it was determined that he would be excused from physical education class. He worked out at home in the gym in the basement – often with Milton and occasionally with his father. (In the beginning, Milton merely used his participation so he would be present for the boy's safety. Later on, he came to enjoy and appreciate the actives, himself. He was probably the fittest 66-year-old in the city – well, there was, *The Crusher*, a local, has-been wrestler still groaning his way through late night matches against ringers on Chanel 329.)

Ricky's upper body was very well developed and he took great pride in it. As yet he hadn't found a way to show it off to the audience he wished to impress – 15 to 19-year-old girls (He wouldn't *ignore* attention from a 25-year-old.) He could bench press weights that would impress any football lineman his age. For pull-ups, he attached sandbags to a belt which approximated what his weight would have been had he had fully developed legs. With the help of his physical therapist they had devised a set of exercises designed specially to develop his legs from the knees up.

He and his physical therapist had fashioned a pair of bend at the knees, hollow, mannequin legs, which, each day would be dressed in shoes, sox, and long pants. Each year, near his birthday, his old ones were traded in for a new, slightly longer set. During the years, he had gone from a specially made child size wheelchair to a full sized adult model. Ricky insisted on a person-propelled model rather than

the motorized version. He was extraordinarily independent. The false legs were attached to his abdomen by a light harness and his pants were snugged around his normal size waist with a belt. His own small legs fit inside the hollow false legs. No one would suspect he wasn't fully developed from the waist down. In all respects, he looked to have a set of 'regular' limbs as he sat in his wheelchair and as he moved back and forth between it and a seat.

Ricky was the sort that had always insisted on doing for himself. Watching him struggle as he learned such things as managing himself in and out of the bathtub, butt-scooting up a ladder in order to obtain books from high on the shelves, getting in and out of vehicles, and taking his place (in his chair) at bat, and in the outfield, was cause for both heartbreak and great respect from Milton – always Ricky's standby person in such activities.

Wheelchair bound or not, Ricky was never the last one chosen in a game of sand lot ball. That wasn't because the other boys felt sorry him. It wasn't even because they particularly liked him. It was because he had a strong and accurate arm, a bat consistently sufficient for one-baggers, wheels that flew like lightning down the first base line, and a glove – which sat in his lap as his arms propelled him across the outfield in pursuit of fly balls – that performed in good fashion, considering everything (wind, sun in the eyes, the occasional collision with the inattentive center fielder – *those sorts of everythings*.).

It was four o'clock. Ricky had decided not to have Milton pick him up after school that day. It was only ten blocks from home. In the interest of trying to develop what more closely resembled a normal social life, he decided to try and spend some time among the kids who always gathered in the green area in front of the building right after school let out. He really didn't have any close friends. He usually ate at the table with the other newspaper staffers, but the paper was the only thing they had in common.

There was one special girl that he liked – Susan. As far as he could tell she didn't even know he existed. *That*, he figured, had to be changed before he could proceed to build a relationship with her. His intention had been to do his 'tricks'

in his wheel chair – pop wheelies, do spins, climb steps and, by leaning just right, travel at a 45-degree angle on one wheel and then the other. He knew many of the boys admired his skill at such things. He wasn't sure how the girls reacted, but he figured the first step in building this new relationship was just to get noticed, not admired. How could a girl not at least pay attention to such a display?

Ricky moved cautiously toward the lawn. That reflected more his general fear of being out in the open than any reluctance to make his play – about *that* he was determined. What good were his wonderful hormones if he didn't pursue them? He looked up and down the block taking his time to carefully assess the situation. It had become his ritual whenever he left a building. Although being inside was not necessarily equivalent to feeling safe, being outside was definitely equivalent to believing danger might be just around any corner, or coming at him from any car, or even popping up from any manhole. They say it isn't paranoia if it's true. That was what Ricky was clinging to.

Not knowing the source of his fear – not knowing which of all the things out there in the world might make some move to hurt him – was, in his mind, far worse than if he could have prepared to elude or meet a known enemy or adversary. Dr. Wilson agreed, but they had made no progress in objectifying the source of his dread. What sort of connection could there possibly be among a spinning barber pole, a waving flag, a little boy's sailor suit and an elusive stranger? And why did his fear well up inside him so consistently even when none of those things were present? Perhaps he was fearful that he might, momentarily, become fearful!

As he approached the grassy area, he came upon a somewhat younger boy, also in a wheelchair. The boy was just sitting there slumped down, looking anemic, isolated, and dejected.

Ricky wheeled over in his direction and offered his hand for a shake.

"I'm Ricky. I call my rig here, Betsy. Not very original, but she's never complained."

The boy broke a smile – not large, but a smile that lasted for only a moment.

"I'm Jake. Hadn't ever thought of giving my wheelchair a name. I'll think on it."

"You new, here?" Ricky asked. "I don't remember seeing you around."

"I'm in eighth grade. My first year in regular school. Taking an advanced placement class here, last period. I'm spoiled rotten, overprotected, and egotistical to the point nobody ever chooses to have a second conversation with me."

"I like an honest, person," Ricky said somewhat taken aback at the boy's intentionally off-putting self-description.

"Know any tricks?" Ricky asked. "On your chair, I mean, not like magic."

It garnered another minimal smile.

"Afraid not. That overprotected thing. Just sitting here without an adult hovering over me is a really big positive deal for me. I hate the hovering thing."

Ricky nodded.

"Why are you here all alone, then? It doesn't sound like the usual way of life for you."

"I lied to my mom and told her I had library things to do until four thirty today. Hoping to buy myself some 'warden-free' time."

"Sorry you have to lie."

Jake looked puzzled, but let it go.

"You and Betsy got tricks?" he asked referring back to Ricky's question.

"Several."

"Can you show me?"

"Of course, I can . . . but will I?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's in it for me – if I show you some tricks."

"I have money – a whole wallet full."

Ricky shook his head.

"That was a joke, mostly. Here's the deal. I'll show you some tricks if you'll promise to try at least one of them. I'll show you how to do it."

"That's a deal. It will absolutely send my mom to her grave."

"I guess that would not be my intention."

"It's not yours. It's mine. Yours is clearly to be nice to

the dork who's strapped into another set of wheels."

"You seem to be pretty smart," Ricky said.

"About some things – school things and how to annoy my mom. Not so much about getting along with other people. Haven't had much practice. I learned to scream and throw myself onto the floor way before I leaned I had the option of using the word, 'please'."

Ricky wondered what sort of nut case he had tried to befriend. Still, he proceeded to pop a wheelie, move forward and backward up on two wheels, and spin in a tight circle.

"Nice," Jake said. "If I try any of those I'll end up over on my back, helpless as a fish out of water."

Ricky moved in close beside him.

"Balancing on one of these things is all in how you position you abdomen and head. Can you move your abdomen?"

"Yes."

"The secret is to keep yourself leaning backward with the weight of your abdomen and shoulders, but keep yourself from falling backward by using your head as a moveable weight to maintain your balance. Watch!"

He demonstrated.

"I'll get behind you so you can't fall. There. Give it a try."

Jake was surprised that he actually trusted the new kid. He did as he had been asked. He went too far, of course. Newbies always leaned back too far the first few times and Ricky knew that. He tipped Jake forward, almost back into a sitting position.

"Now, move your head forward slowly and try using it to gently set yourself back down on the sidewalk. No fair using your chest or shoulders."

Jake tried. It worked, in that it sent him all the way forward with more of a jolt than finesse.

"This time, keep your head moving front and back in tiny motions. It will eventually help you learn how to do the balancing thing."

Although Jake made clear progress, a fifteen-minute lesson was never going to do the trick – so to speak.

"That ungodly long limo heading this way is my driver.

I'll have to leave. Will you help me some more another day?"

"Of course. We wheel jockeys have to stick together, right?"

Jake was clearly puzzled at how lightly Ricky seemed to take his affliction – joking the way he did about his chair. The limo pulled to a stop and the driver got out and opened the back door. Jake made no move to be helpful.

"So," Ricky began, looking at Jake with a wink. "Library, same time after school tomorrow, okay. I think we have a really interesting project going, don't you?"

Jake was puzzled for only a moment. He broke a full smile for the first time when he realized Jake was actually legitimizing the story he had told his mother.

"I agree, but it's going to take a lot of after school research, I'm afraid."

"Who's afraid of doing research? Not us, I'm thinking."

The driver, puzzled and amazed that his young charge was actually conversing with someone, undid the belt that held Jake in his chair and lifted him into the back seat. He closed the door, stowed the chair in the trunk and they were soon on their way. Jake waved. Ricky returned it thinking there was a lot more work to do there than just teaching the kid how to pop a wheelie.

He turned his chair around to face the kids that he'd really come to be with. Most of them were gone. 'Most', however, didn't seem all that bad when one of those remaining was Susan. Some out of nervousness and some according to his plan, he wheelied and spun and vibrated himself front and back and then sat himself back down, all the time intentionally avoiding eye contact with the girl. He even added a nice touch, he thought, by finishing facing the street as if he were oblivious to her presence.

He wondered if she had noticed. He wondered if he should turn around and see if he could get some indication of her reaction. While still pondering his options, he felt a hand on his shoulder. The mere thought of an unexpected hand on his shoulder would have usually sent him into a spiral of fear, but that one didn't. It was different from those he was used to – Milton's pressed harder and Angie's always included a series of pats. This one just sat there, light as a feather, and

yet definitely intending to stay right there on his shoulder.

He was more than a little intrigued that it hadn't scared him into wetting his pants. The idea of an unexpected, foreign hand on his shoulder from behind would normally send him into fits – likely involve throwing a punch and speeding away blowing the whistle Milton had given him to carry when younger to help him feel safer.

Instead, he turned his head as if to all quite casually investigate.

'Holey crap!' he thought to himself. 'It's Susan.'

His mouth went dry. His heart began pumping. He felt his face grow warm. He noted those were the same initial reactions his body had when he encountered the person who had been following him or when a flag moved by during a parade, not to mention having to enter a barber shop. The difference was that his usual fear reaction had been replaced by something different – very different – perhaps even pleasant – although he couldn't define it any further than that. Fortunately, she spoke first.

"That was really nice – what you did for the other kid."

She *had* been watching. Interesting to Ricky, was that it was not his prowess with his chair that had caught her attention, but the nice thing he had done for Jake. Maybe he was onto something. Girls apparently liked nice! She spoke again.

"You're Ricky, right. We were in history together last semester."

As if Ricky had to be reminded – second row, third seat, shiny long hair, wonderful perfume, good grades. He tried to muster a response.

"Yes, Ricky, and history, together. That's correct."

He felt certain that whatever hint of a positive bond had been forming would surely have been dissolved by his inane remark. How did a guy respond to somebody who called him 'nice'?

"What you just did with your chair was really good – athletic, I guess is what I mean."

'Good was good,' he thought to himself. 'Athletic was definitely better.'

He found the *athletic* remark easier to respond to than

the *nice* remark.

"I've had lots of time to practice. Glad you liked it. You're Susan, right?"

She nodded.

"I guess I don't know *your* last name."

'Par for the course,' he thought, but mustered a smile.

"Wilford – Ricky Wilford."

"Mind if I call you Rick – I think it fits a guy your age better."

'She thinks I'm a guy, I mean, like *one* of the guys. That has to be good.'

"Sure, Ricky, Rick. Call me Jehoshaphat for all I care."

'Another really lame brained response. I seem to do better when I keep my mouth shut.'

She smiled and laughed. Ricky felt certain it had been something more than just a polite smile. And she had laughed – she really thought his Jehoshaphat thing had been funny. Nice, skillful, athletic, funny. He'd take those reactions any day.

"Mine is Flowers," she offered.

"Your what?"

"My last same, silly. I think my dad knows your dad."

'That couldn't be good,' he thought. 'I wonder what fathers share with each other about their sons? Probably all the dumb stuff we do. The good stuff wouldn't be funny in a masculine way. It wouldn't make for good conversation. I'm dead on arrival.'

"I heard you tell that kid that you call your wheelchair, Betsy. That your mom's name?"

"My mom's dead – since I was three."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. It's okay. I hardly remember her."

Another limo pulled up, that one white, with a very pretty woman in the back seat. She rolled down the window as it pulled to a stop. She offered a wonderful smile. Susan moved toward it.

"Hi mom. This is my friend, Rick, and this is his awesome transportation, Betsy."

Her mother and Ricky managed an awkward, flimsy, fingers to fingers handshake through the window.

"I gotta go," Susan said. "I hope to see you tomorrow. I always wait here for mom after school."

"Nice talking with you. Later. You, too, ma'am."

It had been Ricky's parting remark. He was quite pleased with it. Polite, calm, collected, not overly pushy, and included her mother. All were things she appeared to value. He figured he had nailed it. And, she mentioned the likelihood of more of the same the following day.

It was a happy, confident, more or less contented fifteen-year-old boy that started the trek down the wide sidewalk toward home. It had been a long time since he had felt that way – that up, that positive, that self-satisfied.

Ricky had noticed Susan glance at his legs several times – not openly. He tried to analyze her reaction to what she saw. It had not been the look of pity he received from every old lady he passed on the street. It wasn't the look the boys in PE class had given him. It was more one of curiosity. He supposed getting a girl curious about his legs was at least a starting point where it came to anatomical curiosity. Milton would think that was funny. He'd remember to share it with him.

Three blocks along his way, an uncomfortable feeling began creeping up his back, across his shoulders, and down into his chest. He knew from experience that meant the corners of his eyes had told his brain something they had not yet shared with him. He turned his head slowly toward the street to bring whatever it was into full focus.

He was traveling the sidewalk along the left side of the four-lane boulevard that ran near his house. He was the only pedestrian on the entire block. In the far lane to his right was an old car – paint faded, door rusted, antennae broken. It was moving no faster than he was, although in all truth his encounter with Susan had contributed a vast amount of adrenalin (or something) to his system and he was moving along a fairly fast clip.

At first, he couldn't make out the driver. There was silver duct tape obscuring the lower portion of the driver's side window indicating, he figured, it was broken. To others it might have seemed humorous – a car moving along down the street without a driver visible in the front seat – but for Ricky it

only stoked his fear.

He slowed a bit to see if the car would do the same. It did. He picked up speed. It picked up speed. Since it was four lanes away from him on a street filled with five o'clock traffic, he decided it couldn't really present any danger. Ricky and his brain knew that, but he was losing the struggle to convince his chest of it.

The car, well past its road worthiness as far as Ricky could determine, pulled one lane to its left – no turn signal, just turned – putting it only three lanes away from him. At that distance, he could make out the upper portion of a person's head. It wore an odd, flat, black hat with short, graying hair exposed below it.

As the car neared the next intersection, the driver sat up some straighter as if to improve the view as it looked right and left. At that point the car's turn signal came to life, indicating a left-hand turn. That would take the car in his direction and only one block from his house. He was nearly at the crosswalk before he realized the driver's intention. He found himself sitting at the curb waiting to cross. He found himself moving the chair forward and back, forward and back as if revving its engine. He found himself watching the car, still driving very slowly, turn in a wide arc, and cross in front of him, not three yards away. It was also where Ricky turned toward home.

If it were to be a shot from a hand gun the positioning and timing had been perfect. A grenade would also work. If it were to stop and back up, he could certainly be run down in a matter of seconds.

Were his instincts great or what? The car stopped against the curb ten yards on down the far side of the little traveled side street. He waited for it to begin backing at a high rate of speed. That didn't happen.

The driver's side window began rolling down. Ricky began propelling Old Betsy down the sidewalk, hoping to pass the car and get far enough ahead to make a difficult target.

"Young man," came an elderly, though rather firm and determined voice.

Ricky looked back over his shoulder in the direction of the sound. It had come from that car, which had begun

moving again, soon to be right alongside him.

As it neared, Ricky could see inside quite clearly. He snorted. He chuckled. He smiled. He pulled Old Betsy to a full stop and tuned 'her' toward the street.

The occupant of the car was calling to him. It was a nun, old enough to have helped Noah count the two by twos onto the ark.

Ricky was still breathing heavily, but his body was letting go of the fear. She spoke again.

"Young man. I'm looking for St. Theresa's Church on Elmwood. Can you point me in the right direction, please?"

Rick gave himself a rapid systems check. Mouth moist enough to speak. Hands no longer shaking. Pants dry enough to indicate there had been no accident.

"You needed to turn *right* back there off Crane Boulevard, not *left*. You can go up and around that circular driveway – he pointed – turn to your left back at this street, cross the boulevard on which you were just driving, and continue for about ten blocks. I doubt if you can miss it – it occupies a full city block."

"Thanks. It's only been thirty-seven years since I've been here. You wouldn't think a body would forget such things in that amount of time. Come here, can you?"

Of course, he *could*. He had mastered the decent and ascent of those insufferable concrete curbs years before. The question was, did he want to. Appearing to be a nun would make an excellent disguise for a hit man.

He pulled in his imagination. There was not a single reason to suspect a hit man was after him. It was a case of over think, or, perhaps under thin – just plain dumb think. He took a big breath and moved down the curb and across the narrow street toward her car.

As he neared, she turned back into the car and was plainly reaching for something on the seat beside her.

'An AK47 waiting on the seat? How could I have been so stupid?' he screamed at himself inside his head.

As it turned out, the AK47 was a plate of cookies secured under an ample portion of plastic wrap.

"Please take these as my thanks for your kind help."

"I'm sure you intended them for somebody else, ma'am,

sister – I'm never quite sure what to call a woman in your profession."

"I prefer Sarah, spelled with an 'h' the way God intended. The cookies were for Father Henry, but if memory serves me, his rotund old tummy will thank you for diverting them."

"You're something else, er, Sarah with an 'h'. Thank you. I'll share them with my family."

She returned her attention to the car – not to the traffic or other potential obstacles. All quite unexpectedly, she put the pedal to the metal and screeched her way around the drive, slid back onto the side street and tore off in the direction of St Theresa and, purportedly, the rotund Father Henry. He hoped she arrived safely. He hoped those who were sharing the street with her survived. He liked her. He smiled and chuckled to himself – 'you could say that for a nun she was one 'h' of a Sarah.' He figured that, at least down inside, she'd have gotten a kick out of it as well. He knew Milton was going to enjoy it.

Chapter Three: TWIRP?

Although from Ricky's vantage point his survival that afternoon *had* all quite seriously been in doubt, he did manage a safe return home. His father was gone for the evening so he ate at the kitchen table with Abby and Milton. That's how he preferred it. To his way of thinking, eating alone in the formal dining room was ridiculous, uncomfortable and anti-social.

He offered a blow by blow account of what had taken place after school. The others listened with interest. Abby had questions. Milton did not. Ricky could have predicted that. He had long before observed that seemed to be a built-in difference between males and females.

He helped with the dishes over Abby's protestations and then took the elevator up to his room. He had mastered the art of backing his chair up one flight at a time, but had promised Milton he'd only do that when someone, "capable of wiping up the very likely pool of blood" was also present. It was a light homework night and he got it out of the way before continuing in his journal.

Journal Entry:

I let my imagination get away from me again today. I really thought I was in danger. It turned out to be nothing more than an ancient nun. From the way she drove, I can't, in all truth, say she was not dangerous, but she clearly didn't present any intentional harm to me. I liked her. That reminds me, I still have cookies in my back pack. So, perhaps they won't get shared with my family!

I seem to be having more and more difficulty keeping what's real separate from what's not real – maybe better said, what's probable from what's not probable. I've reached the point where I don't know if there are really things to be feared out there that are making me interpret benign things as possibly dangerous, or if my mind is just manufacturing the basis for my fears. I didn't say that very well. Let me try it as a question. Has my mind, for some reason, just decided to make me fearful above and beyond any true danger or does it sense some ever-present potential source of harm that I don't or can't?

Dr. Wilson kept trying to uncover something terrifying that happened to me when I was a little boy. I have to doubt that, since I wasn't this way during my early years here with father. There was the accident, of course, but I don't remember anything about it. I think I was unconscious during the whole thing – right from initial impact. Most likely I didn't even see it coming – I was soon to be three. I'm not sure why I think that.

The best I can ascertain is that it all began at a Fourth of July fireworks show when I was five. Milton says I went wild, crying and screaming and running off into the night. I remember the night, but not the display in the sky or my panic. I do remember father picking me up at some point and holding me close to him. I laid my head on his shoulder. I remember how safe I felt at that moment and I didn't want that feeling to ever stop. Sometimes I wonder if my mind is recreating that panic and fear in hope it will be followed by that feeling of safety I had that night when father held me close to him. I think that is my insight – true or false. It may have come from Dr. Wilson.

I met a kid today after school – Jake. He's also in a wheelchair. I thank my lucky stars that I'm in better shape than he is – I don't mean physically, since I have no idea how he came to be a chair jockey. I mean emotionally, and adjustment-wise. He's a mess. I'm no prize, but I sure have a lot more going for me than he does – his people treat him like an invalid. I suppose that might seem humorous to some people – not thinking of a person in a wheel chair as an invalid. What I mean is they don't seem to let him do – try –

anything for himself. I may be reading more into his situation than is there, but from the little I saw I'd bet I'm right. I started teaching him some chair tricks. It felt good to be helping somebody that way. For that short time, I let my fear go – or my awareness of it at least. I wonder if there is a difference.

I also met Susan – a girl in my class who I've had my eye on for some time (like since the first squirt of big boy hormones found its way to my bloodstream). Of course, every other sophomore boy also has their eye on her. I'm sure of that. She knew my name. That surprised me – it pleased me, of course. The fact that I was in my chair didn't seem to put her off. I don't know if I was worried that it might, or just expected that it would. I'm sure I hoped it wouldn't. She's pretty and has very attractive . . . chest area. I plan to see both of them later – both meaning Susan and Jake, not the obvious parts of her chest. That was funny. (Journal: I will keep you abreast of my progress with her – I just kill myself, sometimes.)

That was perhaps an unfortunate expression. I've never actually contemplated killing myself, but a few weeks ago when I read about a boy who did that, I didn't feel sad – I felt happy for him. That was a very scary realization at the time – when I realized my feeling about it. It's two weeks later and I still haven't shaken that awful feeling. At the time I thought I was being compassionate. Now it seems like I was being callus. I think I was tuning in just to the 'relief' aspect for the poor, unhappy, kid and not the finality of the 'death' aspect. I'd give almost anything for relief.

Even sitting here now, completely safe up here on the third floor, I am afraid for my safety. Sometimes when I ride up in the elevator I get really panicked about what if it stopped and I couldn't get out. I could always get out – well, be rescued – so why should such a thing scare me? I suppose it is less the possibility of being trapped than it is wondering who might be planning – wanting – waiting – to trap me.

This is hard to write about, but I need to get it down here. Several nights ago, at dinner I began having very uncomfortable feelings – threatening feelings. They seemed to center on my father. In the whole world, there is nobody safer than he is – father, Milton, Abby – the three safest, most

comfortable people in my life. It adds to my question if something in my mind is just telling me I have to be frightened of everything. It was my father, for god sake! The man who selected me out all the other kids in the world to be his son. How can I possibly be frightened of him?

I believe that sometimes I actually see a flesh and blood person who sets off my feelings of terror, but I can't ever remember a face afterward. Written down like that it makes no sense. Most recently was the situation on the bridge in the fog. I remember glimpses of that encounter like individual frames of a movie film that fade in and out, but never quite become focused. Each of the frames that I can see is set among a dozen others that I can't make out. A form. A limping form. Maybe some colors. Static with no movement. Silent with no sound. A face with no features – maybe a nose, maybe a scar on its cheek, maybe dark glasses, maybe even a crutch, maybe none of those things. It is driving me wild, closer and closer to that edge I am struggling so hard to avoid. I wanted to confront whatever it was there on the bridge that night. I would have if the thick fog hadn't slowed me down. Perhaps I should be thankful for the inclement conditions that night. Who knows what might have happened if I had reached him.

Father knows I am still very anxious when I am outside, but for some reason I cannot lay it all out for him – not to the actual extreme I feel it. He'd probably send me back to a shrink. I need to confront these things right here in the real world, not tucked away in a ten thousand dollar a month office suite on the fifteenth floor of an office building down town. I know I must find the courage to talk with father about things. I guess I'm just not ready yet. Father should be my go to guy. Something inside me seems to be holding me back – a sense of shame about something maybe. Maybe not shame, but a fear of exposing my incompetence. I clearly don't have that figured out. Perhaps I don't need to have it figured out.

Milton knows about all of this. Abby would only know what he may have shared with her or what she may suspect. He shares his wonder with me at the fact that I am able to still function so well. I tell him my activities – writing, the paper, workouts – are the things that are keeping me sane, knowing

that some things about my life are dependable and safe. Who would ever give up dependable and safe for unpredictable and terrifying?

I do my homework, I take care of myself, I exercise, I have begun smiling at those I pass in the hall at school, I look forward with great joy to the day I will be fitted with my artificial legs – those are the sorts of things that give me long term hope. At other times I am immobilized by a state of full-out panic and fear – terror about some nameless, fully unidentified, what? Person, form, image, memory, illusion, hallucination, delusion, fantasy? My total and only purpose at those times is to withdraw and protect myself. The terror is multiplied because I have no idea what it is that I must protect myself from. (... from which I must protect myself!!)

* * *

The next day went well at school. At four o'clock, Jake was waiting – a smile broke across his face as Ricky appeared. It worked out well since Susan seemed to have been delayed. Jake mastered a standing wheelie – still a bit shaky but he could hold it. It would take some practice before he would be able to move along in that position. He seemed pleased with his progress. The limo arrived before either of them was ready for it. Ricky had a question for him – not one requiring an answer. It was, instead, intended to set the seed for possible personal growth.

"I have to ask, Jake. Can't you undo that lap belt by yourself?"

Jake offered a frown as he tried to process the question. Of course, he could – he was thirteen. Why would his new friend not know that? It must have meant something else. A put down, perhaps? He would not let it get in the way of his new friendship.

The driver rounded the rear of the vehicle, opened the door, and reached down to begin loosening the belt. Jake looked at Ricky, suddenly understanding. He pushed the man's hands away and proceeded to attend to the unbuckling, himself.

Ricky offered him a thumbs up. Jake nodded and smiled. Susan had slipped into the scene and stood a few yards away watching. It seemed every time she saw him she

found something new to admire.

Jake was soon on his way. Susan approached. They talked for some time. It was like a real girl and boy talk, Ricky thought. It was definitely different talking with a girl than with a guy. He could see it had its upside as well as its downside.

"There's a dance on Friday night," she said.

She immediately retreated, clearly embarrassed beyond belief. She all quite openly looked at his legs and then away.

"I'm sorry. That was thoughtless. I didn't mean it that way. You just seem so normal I forgot. There I go again - normal. I'm sorry. I'm really a nice person. Forget it. I better go."

"Whoa! Unless you see me as a poor, helpless, waif, I think we need to begin this committee meeting all over."

She offered a glance in his direction and a quick, embarrassed smile. Ricky – that is, Rick – rolled himself closer to her and offered his hand, clearly positioned for a shake.

"I'm Ricky Wilford and who might this attractive young lady be?"

"Susan Flowers, handsome young man."

"It seems we have met before."

"Yes. In history class and yesterday, right here, as I recall."

"I have heard a rumor that there is a dance coming up," Rick went on, finally getting back to the point of all the nonsenses.

"There is. This Friday at seven if my memory serves me right."

"Interesting. I just happen to have Friday night free."

"And so do I."

"It seems a shame for two young people – recently defined as attractive and handsome – to spend a Friday night alone," Rick went on.

"I agree."

"There remains one large problem, however," Rick said putting on a frown.

Susan was ready to hear his excuse – his legs and all. Her spirits dropped and he continued.

"I don't have your address so I won't know where to tell my driver to pick you up."

Susan recovered quickly.

"I can remedy that – here's my address and my phone number for any last-minute things that might come up."

She produced a card – printed like a business card with all the essential information on it. Ricky had no idea kids carried such things. It seemed humorous, but he kept a straight face.

"Six forty-five?" Susan asked/suggested.

"Can we make that a quarter of seven, instead?" he came back, amazed that he was attempting to make still another joke.

"I can adjust my schedule to fit that," she said without a second's hesitation and a big smile.

"Sounds good, then," he said.

Somewhat awkwardly, she removed her hand from his grip. He hadn't realized he still had hold of it. He shrugged somewhat sheepishly. She smiled in a way that suggested it had been fine – nice even, perhaps.

Ricky was more than a little pleased with how things had gone up to that point. Then it happened. The bane of every fifteen-year-old boy's existence – the proverbial foot in the mouth.

"Are clothes required?" he asked.

Susan laughed out loud and put her hands to her mouth.

"I meant, what kind of clothes are required – what kind? I'm sorry. You must think I'm a moron."

"No. I think you have a delightful sense of humor. It's informal. No coats. No ties. No shiny leather shoes. Pants and shirt would probably be a good idea."

"Sounds comfortable. Does the dance have a name – any special occasion?"

"It's called a TWIRP dance – a throwback to the olden days. It's become a tradition here at the school – sort of a substitute for the Halloween parties we had in grade school."

Ricky nodded. He was unfamiliar with the term, TWIRP, but if it was a throwback he figured Abby and Milton would know about it.

"At a quarter of seven, Friday, then. I'll be the kid at your front door wearing pants and the informal wheel chair."

Susan laughed. Ricky joined her.

She really liked him.

He really liked her.

It should be an interesting evening.

Her car arrived and she explained to her mother about the plans. Her mother seemed pleased.

"You're Jonathan's son, is that right?"

"That's right, his one and only."

"Tell him Angela says hi. He and I go way back."

"I will do that."

The long, white limo pulled away. Inside, Susan turned and waved through the rear window. Ricky missed it as he was already up on two wheels spinning his young heart out.

* * *

There were, all of a sudden, several brand-new things on his plate. He followed Milton into the kitchen.

"A tankard of rum and keep the brew coming," he said in his best pirate voice.

He rolled up to the table and pounded on it with his fist maintaining the fully out of character persona.

"Settle for milk and ginger snaps?" Abby came back.

They both understood a response wasn't required. Ricky indicated for the others to take seats. It was their long-standing routine to gather around the kitchen table when important things needed to be tended to.

"Got gobs of questions for you two."

First, what's a TWIRP dance?"

Abby fielded that one, the question piquing her female interests.

"The letters are an abbreviation for, The Woman Is Required to Pay. She is also required to do the asking. They are usually informal."

"What about flowers?"

Again, it was Abby.

"It is the girl's responsibility to see to all of that. It's informal, like I said, so flowers usually aren't a part of it."

"Okay, now, can you teach me to dance by Friday night?"

The other two looked at each other. Milton spoke.

"Of course, we can. We cut a mean rug."

"I'm not familiar with expression."

Abby explained.

"It means we dance really well together – neat-o, jive, cool, awesome, clutch – take your pick depending on your generation."

"Okay. I suppose that establishes you as just the set of experts and advisors I need. I'm thinking I'll need a side-by-side version of at least one slow dance and one fast dance. Can't see how face to face could be worked out. I want to at least hold her hand."

"We have you covered, kid," Abby said clearly into the activity with more outward enthusiasm than Milton. "You have the girl wear a scarf that she can take off so you can each hold onto one end and we'll all but have you dancing cheek to cheek."

"I have her phone number. I can arrange that. A scarf."

"After dinner, then?" Milton asked.

"Sounds good. I can get my homework out of the way by seven. Will father be home for dinner?"

"Yes, he will," Milton said.

"Then more like seven thirty, I suppose."

At dinner, he explained the upcoming *first* in his life. His father was clearly pleased and just let him talk on about it. A son's first date is always a special occasion for a father. He had just one serious comment and offered it with a smile.

"A dance. You do realize that you are in a wheelchair, right."

They chuckled together both understanding that Ricky had never let 'the chair' get in the way of trying new things he wanted to do.

"Do you need us to find you a professional teacher – someone who specializes in such things for . . . boys in wheelchairs?"

"Abby and Milton say they have it covered. I'd be pleased to receive any advice you may have, also."

He added that as an afterthought, not wanting his father to feel left out.

"I doubt if my two left feet have anything useful to offer.

How about I drive you Friday night, though?"

"That will be great. May I ask how you know Susan's mother?"

"Angela? Socially. Acquaintances in college and now we occasionally run into each other at events; her husband is also an attorney. He was my roommate in college for one year."

"I'll bet he has stories he could tell me," Ricky said, teasing his father just a bit."

"I'll make you a deal, son. You never ask him about our days together and I'll . . . not ground you for the rest of your life."

"How can a guy refuse such a generous offer?"

It was worth smiles and chuckles between them.

Seven thirty arrived. The instruction took place in the living room with the throw rugs rolled up against the base boards and the several coffee tables removed to the sidelines. '*Took place*' seems like an anemic description – '*consumed*' the living room better describes it. Whether it was the boy's youth, his wheels, or his exuberance, he soon had his older cohorts exhausted and lying back, fully spent, in two of the large, overstuffed chairs. It had been a very good time.

By nine thirty the first lesson was over. Ricky felt quite confident. Abby was truly amazed at the young man's skill and grace. Milton delivered a smug glance in her direction that said, 'I told you so; cough up the ten bucks'. It was one bet she was happy to have lost.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

It has been a good day – who's kidding, it has been one of the very best days of my entire life. I'm going on my first date. I'm going to my first dance. It's with a great girl named Susan. It seems that at a TWIRP thing the guy just has to show up. I can do that. I've been showing up places my entire life.

Why am I beginning to have those old, familiar, terrible feelings? They weren't here a minute ago. Things are wonderful. Why do these feelings want to deprive me of my good times? It's like I'm not to be allowed good times. Well, I'll not allow it! I'll wad that terror up into a tiny ball and hide it

behind my liver or spleen or where ever I have room in there.

I can do that. The problem is, what if by being with Susan I will be putting her in danger. What if some evil villain runs us off the road and the car plunges into a ravine and bursts into flame? What if a sniper takes us out as we leave her house? What if the punch at the party is poisoned?

This is ridiculous. I am ridiculous. What if I panic at the dance and can't move or forget all I'm learning about dancing? What if my lungs and heart finally do get crushed by the horrible lump in my chest? Why is this happening to me? Maybe I should go back and talk with Dr. Wilson.

There is one interesting thing about this. Always before, my fears have focused on things that are either happening in the present or have happened in the past. Tonight, I'm fearing things in the future – things that can't possibly exist yet.

It is so hard. It's the old rollercoaster thing. Maybe it's just time to give up. Things are clearly getting worse. I try and try and things just get worse. It's going to be another cry myself to sleep night. I hope sleep comes fast. I hope the nightmares stay away. Doc gave me some pills to help me sleep. They'd be two years old, now. Maybe I need to go back to using them – or taking them. An interesting nuance of difference, there. I suppose if they're old I'll need to take more of them.

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Chapter Four: THE THREE MINUTE MILE!

The moon, such as it had been, was gone. The eastern sky wore the colorful trappings of yet another sunrise struggling to escape the relentless tug of the horizon. The fog was slipping off to wherever fog went during the day. Everything suggested the makings for a fine fall day.

As he had expected, the night before Ricky had cried himself to sleep. He opted not to use pills. He had no recollections of nightmares, but that wasn't necessarily proof that they hadn't come and wouldn't surface as terrifying visions later in the day. He awakened before his alarm went off – he kept it set for six. Since he had, in fact, awakened, he figured, therefore, he must have been asleep. He felt pretty good. That was a nice surprise. He stretched himself back into the realm of consciousness and scratched himself in those places that always seemed to need a thorough scratching at the beginning of each day.

His early morning routine consisted of 100 pushups, 100 pull ups and five reps of ten butterflies each on his back with twenty pound weights. He had all the necessary equipment in his room. That was followed by a brisk, full out sprint around the block for endurance/cardio training. Then, back to his room for a shower, teeth brushing, anti-zit cream, hair combing and into his clothes and chair. It took an hour. No more. No less. Breakfast was at three minutes past seven – a time Ricky had established when he was much younger figuring that allowed him three minutes to get from his room down stairs and plant a kiss on his father's cheek as he went through the door on his way to work. His father was always

waiting, often finishing his coffee, which was his full and sufficient breakfast. In recent years, the kiss had been replaced by a manly handshake, but still, it was a regular part of the morning routine. Neither would have felt right without it before beginning the major part of his day. He ate with Abby and Milton. School began at eight.

When he propelled himself to school, instead of having Milton drive him, he allowed twenty minutes although in a pinch he could cover the ten blocks in less than half that. It was mostly a residential area and the blocks were not long like they were downtown. He enjoyed using that time to contemplate those things that all boys his age contemplate: how did the universe benefit from the presence of black hole; if time slowed as a living organism approached the speed of light then why did time not speed up while one slept; if the earth had been a square how would each of those six surfaces been referred to. Just the *usual* kid stuff like that!

At breakfast, he informed Abby and Milton about some research he needed to do at the city library after school to alert them that he would be home an hour later than usual. The library was just a block on the other side of the pedestrian bridge which was four blocks east of the house.

His school day was generally uneventful. By noon he began to grow tired, which told him he hadn't slept as well, or perhaps as long, as he figured he had. He began pacing himself since there was still a lot on his agenda.

Afterschool he spent a few minutes with Jake who had already mastered the quick moves front and back while balancing on the two big wheels. Rick had a few suggestions and soon Jake was turning in circles – slowly and somewhat awkwardly, but still in circles, on two wheels. Even better than that, Ricky thought, his face was learning to hold a smile.

"A+," Rick said clapping as Jake's limo pulled up. Jake mounted a major smile as he rolled himself alongside the back door. He held up his right hand to make sure he had Rick's attention. He unbuckled his seat strap, leaned over to the side of his chair, and opened the car door. Then, with a great deal of unpracticed effort, slid himself inside. The driver, not entirely pleased with the delay, stowed the chair, undoubtedly wondering who this young Jake-impersonator might be. Ricky

pulled in close to the back window.

"Seems you've been working on lots of your own tricks."

Jake just smiled and nodded as the car pulled away. That day they each flashed a thumbs up.

"Did you see that?" Rick said turning to Susan who had been patiently waiting while the two boys had been engaged.

"I did. You're a great role model for him. I'm proud of you."

The role model comment caught him off guard. He'd never considered himself a role model. That seemed like a whole lot of responsibility he hadn't signed on for. He tried to handle it with a joke.

"Roll model, as in showing him how to move his wheels. Funny. I like it."

"Not what I meant and I think you know that."

The topic was dropped and they talked for a few more minutes about nothing in particular. It was not the topic, but the mere fact of just talking together that was important. He explained he had to get to the library. He mentioned the scarf and referred to it as their secret weapon, without explaining. He hoped she liked a man of mystery.

Before he left, she put her hand out toward him. He had no idea what he was supposed to do with a girl's hand hovering there in front of him. Shaking seemed inappropriate. A high five or knuckle bump was out of the question. In movies, he'd seen Frenchmen kiss a woman's hand, but felt sure it was way too early in their relationship for that. He reached out and placed one hand under hers – palm up – and the other on top, just holding them there for a long moment. Apparently, it had been just the right thing to do. She smiled and after a lingering moment, slowly withdrew her hand. She pointed to her white limo pulling to a stop.

"See you at school tomorrow," she said.

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

That day he kept his eyes on the car as it pulled away and met her wave with one of his own. The wave he seemed to have boiling up inside him was one of wild gyrations, like might be used when trying to catch the attention of a movie star passing in a motorcade, but the one he more reasonably

delivered was gentle, yet manly at the end of a fully extended right arm. He figured he had nailed that one perfectly. This boy girl stuff was really very nice. Different from the 'let's get right to the passionate stuff' that he had always dreamed about, but really very nice.

By five thirty he had gathered the information he needed at the library about the early history of Springfield. It was to serve a triple purpose: fulfill a research assignment for an English essay, become his column in the paper for the following week, and serve as the basis for work he was doing on the city's website. He had gone to that website first, thinking it would be an easy resource for the information he needed. It hadn't been, so he pointed that out in an email to the mayor who invited him to put together something he thought would be appropriate for a new, History of Springfield page, on their municipal site. He figured it might extend into extra credit in sociology if properly presented – helping the citizens build a bridge to their social and cultural past. (There was, you see, a budding con man inside the lad, and whether it would eventually be put to work in the service of good or evil was still somewhat up in the air!)

It was the time of year in which daytime temperatures might peak into the low sixties but, dependably, the world quickly cooled into the upper forties by early evening. The humidity that rode the fog into the low-lying expanse between the library and home, dampened the air and made it seem some chillier than that. Add even a slight breeze and it became downright uncomfortable with the fog being compressed into thick blankets that hung near the ground.

Ricky hated the fog because it hid the world from him. Life was scary enough when everything was out in the open and he could contemplate the intentions of the him, or her, or them or whatever was behind *that* door or in *that* passing vehicle. Not being able to see the potential sources of problems often became nearly debilitating.

He always fought it. He knew he didn't dare give in. He could have called Milton and arranged to be picked up, but he believed he had to face his fears. He had read that insanity served the purpose of shielding a person from his overwhelming fears so if he didn't keep fighting them he was

as good as crazy.

Sometimes he questioned why living with terror might be better than living within the serenity that insanity allowed. He decided even thinking about that was a sign of weakness – of considering giving up, giving in, forfeiting his potential. He redoubled his determination to keep up the fight.

When the library lights flickered, signaling it was five minutes until closing, Ricky collected his things and moved outside. Experience had taught him the lights out front and in the parking lot remained on ten additional minutes. The library sat at the point where the walking bridge entered across the stream from the west. It was no more than forty yards from there to the front door so the library lights kept the eastern half of the bridge lit as long as they remained on. Ricky always made a point of reaching the top of the bridge before they went off, even though he knew the opposite side would be sitting in darkness.

He sat in his chair on the wide, concrete, patio just outside the front doors, making ready for his mad dash toward home – forty yards to the bridge, fifty to get over it, and then four blocks to his front porch. It was a four-minute sprint providing he got he got a great roll off the far side of the bridge.

He noticed a person leaning up against one of the light poles at the near end of the deserted parking lot. With the light directly above him like that, Ricky could make out details. It was a man in a long coat. His head was bare – long hair, but no hat. He appeared to have a single crutch under his right arm. The man turned just a bit facing Ricky more straight on. He lowered his head slightly. Yes, it was a crutch. And, the man's long hair was held in place by a head band the details of which he could not make out. He couldn't get a handle on the person's age.

The man just stood there, as if dropping his chin would somehow hide or disguise him. It seemed like a very winnable race to Ricky – him in his speedy chair and the man walking with a crutch. He began turning his wheels in a leisurely fashion at first, not wanting to spook the man into action – if indeed he had bad intentions toward him.

The form had all the individual components Ricky had

seen as flashes of separate bits and pieces before – the long hair with no cap, the headband, the long coat, the crutch – just never assembled all together like that. He was momentarily bothered by the fact that he had also gathered another – separate – set of components that didn't fit that picture, but he put that out of his mind.

He looked toward the top of the bridge – he always defined that as the end of the first leg in his trek home. He paused as a figure suddenly appeared up there. Almost immediately an odd – bizarre – thing took place. The man in the parking lot suddenly focused the beam from a powerful flashlight on the man at the top of the bridge and that second man beat a hasty retreat back down the other side – the very way the shadowy form had done a few nights before. The man under the light stirred as if gathering himself to start in Ricky's direction.

By then, Ricky's heart was, of course, pounding wildly and he found it difficult to take full, deep breaths. The pressure had built inside his chest beyond anything he had ever experienced. The glass doors behind him plunged into darkness. He was on his own. A call to anyone would garner no timely response. It was fight or flight time.

He snapped the little belts across the tops of his leather gloves and positioned his hands back on the wheels. With no hesitation, he began propelling himself toward the bridge. He knew that on his side of the bridge there was somebody apparently about to intrude on him from behind. He had no idea about the man who had left. He decided to escape the known threat and take his chances with the unknown – it seemed the only reasonable approach.

He was soon thirty yards from the bridge, then twenty, ten. His wheels hit the first planks and he began taking the rise, maintaining what speed he could. He usually paused at the top. There was no pausing that night. His head and shoulders jerked uncomfortably backward as he began the descent. He let the wheels fly faster by far than he had ever made that downhill run before.

He saw no one in front of him. He had no idea what might be taking place behind him. Way too late, he began to wonder if the two of them were working together. Had the

flashlight beacon been a signal to set some pincer plan into action – one of them at the rear and the other in front, set to meet, perhaps, at the base of the bridge? It was too late to modify his strategy so he pressed on gaining speed with every yard.

His wheels hit the sidewalk at the bottom of the other side. Just four blocks, mostly a flat straightaway, lay ahead. His arms were strong and he knew he could count on them. He was oblivious to the pain that was already growing in his back and shoulders.

Three blocks to go – there was a street light just ahead, a welcome oasis in the silent darkness. He crossed the street. Two blocks. There would be no street – meaning no light – until he crossed Elm on the other side of the park, but then he would be within ten yards of the ramp that led up onto his front porch.

One block to go. The sidewalk narrowed. It was barely wider than the width of his chair. One miscue and he'd be no better off than a car flipped over in a ditch, its wheels spinning against the air. He noted the need for extreme care, but maintained his speed.

Not until he was up the ramp and sitting beside the front door did he allow a glance back in the direction from which he had come. Nobody was there. Could the second man already be lurking there in the bushes along the porch?

He fumbled just a bit as he worked to punch in the security code and push the door open. Milton was waiting in the entry hall and moved to close and lock the door behind the boy. He had watched the lad's mad dash from the park to the front porch and had been reaching to open the door just as Ricky entered.

Ricky opened his arms and Milton moved closer, bending down and offering his own. It was a welcome hug, but one that Ricky cut short when he realized his face was soaked in tears.

"Let's get to the elevator before anybody else sees me like this."

They were soon upstairs in his room. He was still breathing hard and his pulse continued to race. He became aware of throbbing in his temples and his dry mouth and

throat. He removed his jacket and hat and Milton took them to the closet offering him a towel from the bathroom to wipe his face.

"I assume there is a story behind this," Milton said, really asking.

"There's a story, alright. I just wish I knew whether it was real life biography or crazy brain fiction. I want to lie down on my bed. How about a couple extra pillows from the couch? I need to write in my journal."

* * *

JOURNAL ENTRY:

It was the worst, the most intense of my . . . what . . . encounters, I suppose. If I only had some way of knowing whether they were real or imagined. 'Imagined' is the wrong word. When I'm engaging my imagination, I know I am fabricating a fantasy. In this, I don't know that. I've given it so much thought. In a fantasy, I can create things that skirt reality – like flying dogs or talking raccoons. These encounters have none of those implausible elements. All the elements stay well within the bounds of real world possibilities.

Perhaps that's a substantial vote that they really are occurring. A great fantasy tonight would have had me approach the top of the bridge and just continue to fly up into the sky like E.T. in front of the moon. That didn't happen. In fact, as my chair suddenly turned back down the west slope my neck was jerked – like whip lash – and I feel that pain even now. That was real.

But what about the men? Why about the men? I can't for the life of me (another poor choice of expression) figure any motivation. I'm a nice boy. I never set out to hurt or harm anybody. I never even put others down. Surely, I haven't wronged anyone to the point they would want to do to me whatever it is they want to do to me. See, if I just knew what they wanted to do to me then perhaps I could get a handle on it – make that important connection.

I don't have a single answer, beginning with the most basic question: are these encounters real or unreal? Do they happen out in the real world or somewhere deep inside my sick mind?

It has come to me that there may be some connection

among my long term irrational fears. The barber pole, the flag and that sailor suit when I was four all bore the colors red, white, and blue. The pole and the flag move but not the suit. The flag and the suit are fabric, but not the pole. The pole and the flag were not mine, the suit was. I can imagine that the fireworks display also was largely, red, white and blue. The only consistent characteristics seem to be the colors.

So, why would I be frightened of red, white, and blue? Is it somehow like the riddle: what's black and white and red/read all over? (I remember in the fourth-grade I created an alternative answer to 'newspaper'. I suggested a nun with a profusely bloody nose. It didn't catch on and apparently, my teacher called my father who called doctor Wilson who brought it up at our next session.) So, what's red and white and blue all over? (a depressed peppermint stick?) What's red and blue and white all over? (the ghost of a very cold Santa Clause?) What's white and blue and red all over? (a very embarrassed Smurf nurse?)

I have read that attempts at humor, like insanity, work to shield a person from his pain. I'm pretty good at that – being humorous, I mean. I can usually make people laugh – mostly older people like those around the house. I just seldom enter into frivolity. I seem to have other things on mind lately.

'MIND'. That's what's at the center of this. If I'm seeing dangers that are really there it is thanks to my mind. If I'm seeing things that are really there, but misconstruing their intent as dangerous to me, that's thanks to my mind. If I'm fabricating the whole thing subconsciously – illusion, hallucination, delusion, whatever – it is thanks to my mind. Three ways to drive me over the edge all courtesy of my friendly, neighborhood, mind. A case of 'I can't live with it and can't live without it'.

So, here is my decision. Huge! Sweeping! All encompassing! Life changing! I can't play this thing from all three angles. I choose to believe something is really happening, but I haven't yet come to understand what it is or what the evil participants' motives are. Instead of configuring it from the standpoint of fear, I will try to begin thinking of it as a mystery that has a logical answer. That redefines me a

detective rather than a victim. Detectives keep cool heads and systematically search for clues and alternative interpretations that lead to a solution. Conversely, victims remain fearful and incapacitated, frozen without hope or solutions.

Beginning tomorrow – beginning at this very moment – it will be detective Ricky Wilford on the case. Make that Detective Cedrick Anderson Wilford. He is smart, logical, resourceful and not all that bad looking – not to mention a budding role model and becoming pretty good with the ladies, well, at least, the lady. (Could be an interesting character in a story.)

He dialed his phone.

“Abby. Detective Cedrick Anderson Wilford, the first, here. I am starved. Any chance there might be food in your kitchen if I slipped down?”

“Pot roast with lemon cheese cake for dessert. What to drink?”

“I’ll take milk. Betsy needs oil – 3 in 1 will be fine. Do your best not to confuse the two.”

He hung up. He found himself giggling. Will wonders never cease, he thought. He dialed again.

“Milton. Just wanted to let you know I’m doing much better – *good*, even. About to stuff my face.”

“I have already received that word. I am pleased. I’m on my way to fetch the oil in the red and white can.”

Abby, Milton, Milk and oil. It seemed Detective Wilford had a very good support staff.

The lingering problem was that Ricky understood rapid mood changes and irrational, split second modifications in life changing plans were also an indication of something less than a stable, well-adjusted mind.

Chapter Five: TWO DANCES

Friday evening Rick couldn't wait for the clock to do what clocks were supposed to do. He and Milton were parked a block away from Susan's house a half hour early. (His father had been called away.) Milton was amused. The car reeked of aftershave – should have been *pre-shave* since the boy was probably still three years away from needing a razor – thus, anything *after* it. The most humorous aspect of it all was reflected in the older gentleman's comment as he watched Ricky in the back seat through the rear-view mirror.

"Smell your armpits one more time, son, and you'll wear out your sense of smell."

Ricky grinned.

"I just want my first date to be perfect."

"Son, if your first date is perfect, it will be the first time in the long history of the human male that any first date has ever been perfect. Just relax. Do your best. Let happen what will happen. Think of it as an important learning experience. It will give us all something to laugh about on your thirtieth birthday."

Ricky did some quick figuring – that would put Milton at 96. It was the first time he had considered that at some point he would lose Milton. That was a bummer. Not what he wanted at that moment so he changed the topic – not that it had actually been a topic anywhere but inside his head.

"Thanks for helping with the dancing. I hope the other kids don't think I'm too dorky out there in my chair. I don't want to embarrass Susan."

"And if they do that is most certainly their problem and not yours. Like I said, just relax and enjoy the evening. If this Susan is the girl she seems to be, nothing derisive the others may think will be of any consequence to her. After all, she did want to go with you, not any of them."

"On your first date, did you just relax and have fun, Milton?"

Milton chuckled.

"Well, no. My date wore a floor length yellow gown. Before the evening was over I had stepped on its hem which ripped the dress at the waist; I spilled punch down the front of her dress . . . well, all over her; fortunately, it was pineapple punch so once it dried it really didn't stand out – other than smelling like Hawaii. And, to top off a truly odd evening when she leaned in to give me a good night kiss I sneezed in her face. Seems I was allergic to the flowers I had given her."

"Wow. What an awful night. Did you ever speak to her again?"

"Just long enough to say, 'I do' and live happily with her for twenty years.

"You're saying there can be life after a first date. I suppose that is reassuring. Will she expect a kiss from me?"

"Those things just happen. See how it turns out. If the chance arises, however, I will give you one unsolicited piece of advice. In a first kiss, less is always better than more."

"I get the less part. I'll have to think some on the 'more'. I'm so revved up I think I'll get myself home afterward. I'll call and let you know when I start."

"I understand," Milton said. "You make this so easy for me."

"Not having to wait up and come get me you mean?"

"Goodness no! Abby and I will still be up and requiring a blow by blow over hot chocolate the minute you come through the door. I meant it is easy because I understand you know how to act – how to treat a girl. You make me comfortable about every aspect of this evening."

That had been a good news/bad news message. Rick was pleased about the reputation he had established with Milton. It did, however, put a lot of pressure on him to come through.

Ricky sighed. The hands on his watch finally moved. Milton started the car. They arrived at the house. Ricky sat there at the door. Before ringing the bell, he shot a glance in Milton's direction. It was met by the man's famous thumbs up. Ricky, well, Rick, was determined to be ready for whatever unfolded.

The evening was exceptional. Later, he wrote about it in his journal. Afterward, they walked from the school back to her place – just four blocks. It had been her suggestion earlier in the week. The night was cool but not uncomfortable.

He left her at her door. The kiss had been, as has been said, magical. As he turned toward home, every corner of his being revved with energy, but he set an easy pace. He wanted to savor the memories of the evening. He would never be on his way home from his first date again.

Deep in thought, he had freed himself from his more typically suspicious, ever-on-alert mind set. He had taken Milton at his word and relaxed, focusing on the potential for fun and friendship rather than what the other kids thought of him. He hadn't seen the van shadowing him just behind and to his right on the other side of the narrow street.

It moved on ahead and stopped at the curb half way up the block. A man got out of the driver's door. That was the first time any of it had registered with Ricky.

Ricky had dressed a bit upscale from strictly informal, wearing a button down the front blue shirt with dark blue slacks and blue sneakers. He wore a wide, black belt with a large buckle. Its width helped support his back and keep him comfortable in his chair during activities.

Seeing the man leaning against the car, his old feelings flooded over him. He paused and slipped his belt out of his pants loops. Wound around his knuckles, he figured it tripled the effectiveness of a punch. As a swinging weapon, the heavy buckle could deliver sever blows and possibly cuts from three feet away. He had been practicing all those things for many months and felt confident he had mastered the moves.

He reached for his cellphone. It was not in his pocket. He must have left it in the car earlier. Not good!

He moved on down the sidewalk, keeping the man in view only through the corners of his eyes. It was definitely not

the man he had seen in the library parking lot. This one wore a ball cap – difficult to say what color there in the low light. He was wearing a sports team jacket of some kind – a shiny large ‘A’ on the left side of the upper chest area. His pants appeared to be baggy jeans. He wore gloves and carried something at his side in his right hand. It was held out of sight behind his leg. That image fit the compilation of snippets he had already collected of his visions of a second man. Like on his last trip home from the library, the individual frames came together to fit the person he was seeing. It could have been the man at the top of the bridge – the silver jacket and ball hat.

Although he tried to make it out, the number on the license plate was indistinguishable in the darkness. It did appear to be an instate plate.

The man crossed the street as if to intercept him. Aside from the growing tightness in his chest, two other things became obvious to Ricky: The man walked with a slight limp and he carried a baseball bat.

He stepped onto the sidewalk just ahead, blocking Ricky's way. Ricky prepared the belt and looked up.

“May I help you?” Ricky asked.

“May? That's high falootin' talk. Jonathon brain washed you has he?”

“You know my father?”

“He ain't your father. I know all about that.”

Ricky thought better than to argue the point at that moment. He restated his question in different words.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to get into that van without givin' me no trouble.”

“Why in the heck would I do that? You going to entice me in with the promise of candy?”

“What I'm gonna do is beat you silly if you don't do as I say.”

He raised the bat in a threatening manner. Ricky believed his threat was sincere and that his aim would be accurate.

“That's not a very friendly way to begin a new relationship.”

“Shut up. Now move. Get in.”

Ricky estimated the man was six feet tall and weighed a bit above average – 200 pounds, maybe. That beat his own hundred pounds in every way. He would not enter the van voluntarily, although at that moment he had no idea how to avoid being forced inside. With his left hand, he unbuckled the belt that held him into his chair. He could move on his own – not fast, not gracefully, not with any power, but he could move. Once free of the lap belt his own legs were no longer confined to the chair. They fit down inside of the hollow mannequin legs and slipped out easily.

Still, Ricky had no plan. The man held the bat high. One blow to his head and he understood that not only would he no longer be in control of the situation, but there would be major damage to the one part of him that worked best. He really liked his head – the brain it contained, the face that decorated it and the long dark hair that framed it. He decided to pretend he was going along with the man. It would buy a few more moments.

“You’ll have to help me get my chair down the curb. Center of the block curbs aren’t wheelchair friendly.”

“Don’t try to pull my leg. I seen you do it lots a times.”

Ricky, the detective, gleaned two things from the conversation up to that point. First, he had been following him – observing him – just like he had figured. That was a vote for Ricky’s sanity. Second, his grammar suggested an uncultured upbringing. He wasn’t sure how either of those could be of assistance at that point, but all the detectives in all the mystery books always said, ‘Data is data. You never know what’s going to help solve the case’ (or something close enough to that to be included here).

The man reformed his grip on the bat with both hands moving his fingers with some determination. It was a signal he meant business, Ricky figured. He moved it to within two feet of him. Ricky decided it was then or never. He took mental aim at those fingers gripping the bat and let fly with the buckle end of his belt. It was a fierce, direct hit that had been driven by the gallons of adrenalin the evening had produced within his system.

The man swore and dropped the bat holding his bleeding hands between his legs, which caused him to bend

down slightly. In one well-practiced move, Ricky removed the large flashlight from the permanent carrying case on the rear of his chair, and delivered a blow to the back of the man's bowed head.

Fully unexpected, the man with the headband and crutch appeared out of the shadows from the far side of the van. He looked directly into Ricky's face.

"Get out of here, Tommy. Go! Now!"

Although little of that made sense, the part about leaving held a certain appeal and he sped off down the middle of the narrow street. It took some on the spot improvising to turn the wheels when not belted in place, but he managed as far as the middle of the next block. As he paused to buckle in, he turned and looked back. The man who had accosted him lay spread eagle on the street face down. The man with the crutch was nowhere to be seen.

Ricky turned his chair and hurried on home. It was difficult to get a handle on his feelings – frightened, lucky, thankful, relieved, determined to never set foot out of his house again.

Inside the entry hall, the looks of happy anticipation on the faces of Abby and Milton immediately turned to serious frowns.

"What on earth?" Milton said looking at him.

Abby reached out and straightened his collar.

Under other circumstances Ricky would have seen that as humorous. Milton wheeled him into the kitchen where Abby looked him over for injuries.

Ricky related what had taken place.

"You need to speak with your father about this," Milton said. "He expects to be back by midnight – less than an hour from now."

Ricky nodded.

"I'll wait for him up in my room. I did have a good time tonight. I'll fill you in on all that tomorrow."

"You left your phone in the car," Milton said handing it to him.

Ricky nodded – his silent 'thanks' – and moved into the hall and entered the elevator.

Milton left the house to see what he could find down the

street and see if the police needed to be called.

He found nothing – no van, no man with bleeding, broken knuckles, no man with a crutch ready with an eye witness account. Throughout that area, the houses sat far back from the street, most with high walls out front, cradling the extended lawns between them and the residences. It would be unlikely if anybody would have seen anything. He returned to the house.

When Jonathon returned, Milton prepared him with what he knew. After the briefest exchange, Ricky's father went up to his son's room.

"I understand you had to dance with an unexpected partner on the way home tonight," he began.

It was the sort of thing that would have usually promoted smiles and chuckles between them. Not that night. His father hadn't really expected any.

"So, tell me what happened."

He sat on the edge of the bed beside Ricky, turned so they could look into each other's faces. Ricky, leaning back against the headboard, gave what he thought was a very accurate, step by step account of the incident. His father listened without comment, nodding from time to time more as if to suggest understanding than belief.

After Ricky finished his father spoke.

"I'm happy you are safe and home. Milton checked down the street and tells me there is no evidence of anything left now to suggest who might have been there. You show no bruises or injuries."

Ricky frowned. The conversation had not gone where he figured it would.

"Don't you believe me, father?"

"You've been under a lot of stress lately, son. Maybe your mind was playing tricks on you."

Ricky figured he had just one ace to play.

"Tell me why a total stranger with a crutch would call me Tommy?"

The question obviously caught his father by surprise. Ricky could ascertain nothing beyond that. His father responded.

"Tommy, you say. Must have been a case of mistaken

identity."

"Or, a case of somebody knowing something about me that you don't want me to know."

It had been as close to unkind words as Ricky had ever spoken to his father. He immediately tried to withdraw them.

"I'm sorry. You may be right. I'm very confused right now. Maybe I just need to get a good night's sleep and things will seem better in the morning."

His father agreed and left him alone. Ricky had a plan and it began with getting his father out of his room as soon as possible. That step had been easily completed. There was information he needed and he figured it would be available in his father's den. He waited until two a.m. when he felt certain everyone in the house would be sleeping.

Taking the elevator would produce those telltale bumps and rumbles and screeches that always fill the house at night indicating it was in use. Ricky chose to scoot himself down the hall to the stairs and down them to the den. It took some time. As strong as he was moving that far in that manner required a good deal of energy.

The den door was unlocked. It had remained unlocked since the day of the grand tour years before. Had it been locked that night, Ricky thought it would have been a sure signal that there were things in there his father suddenly didn't want him to see or know.

Since it was no longer off limits to him, Ricky felt only a mild twinge of guilt about the search he was getting under way. He went through the file drawers one by one just running the tab labels to see if any of them looked promising. He was searching for several things – most importantly at that moment, seemed the name Tommy. In some way it had triggered a pleasant memory as soon as the man had spoken it. Could that have been his name before he was adopted? It was close enough to the 'Timmy' that had on some occasions seemed like a comfortable reference from his early years.

A second part of his search was related to any information about people – men with a limp or who walked with a crutch in particular – that might have been a part of his life back then. Using those topics as his guide, two folders caught his attention. He found a ream of paper and replaced

the contents of each folder with a similar amount of blank paper to disguise the theft – well, the borrowing. He replaced the folders in the file cabinet and put the information he had taken in a plastic grocery bag, which he carried at his shoulder.

The trip up the stairs was time consuming. He backed up one step at a time. Twelve foot ceilings made for very long staircases and there were two of them. He entered his room at four o'clock. He climbed up onto his bed and started through the pages – doing his best to keep them in order for the planned, eventual, return trip to the den.

* * *

"Ricky! Ricky! Sleepyhead! Way past breakfast time even for a teenager prone to sleep in on Saturday morning."

It was Milton. Ricky had fallen asleep while going through the information. It had been arranged on the bed beside him the night before. That morning it was neatly stacked on his nightstand.

Ricky noted the new arrangement.

"You going to tell father?"

"Tell your father? Whatever do you mean?"

"The papers. You know. They were here. Now they are there."

"The shoemaker's elves, I suspect. You know how those little chaps like to keep things all neatened up."

"Thanks."

"Again, Master Ricky, you are making no sense whatsoever this morning."

He did manage a wink.

"Would you like to have breakfast up here today?"

"No. I'll come down. Is father still here?"

"No. He left this note for you."

Milton removed an envelope from his coat pocket and spoke:

"I'll see you in a few minutes in the kitchen, then," Milton said. "Pancakes and patty sausage, I believe is what Abby has planned. It also smelled like cobbler of some variety in the oven when I left just now"

Milton turned and left.

Ricky read the note.

'Son – I have to be out of town over the weekend. I tried to get out of it, but your grandfather is ill so it has to be me. I'll call you when I'm free. PS. I've made an appointment for you with Dr. Wilson for this afternoon. I want you to keep it.'

Those last six words meant it was an order. His father rarely stated things in that form, but Ricky understood – it *had* been an order. It was the last thing Ricky wanted to do that day – well, that day or the next day or any other day. He had important things to take care of.

Over breakfast, he gave Abby and Milton the bare essentials of the time he had spent with Susan on Friday night. His heart wasn't in it. They understood and Abby even refrained from asking questions. Ricky made arrangements with Milton to get to the appointment. They needed to leave by two o'clock.

After breakfast, Ricky returned to his room, skipping his exercise routine. He felt more than a little blue, a condition he seldom allowed because he was terrified that once it took hold he wouldn't be able to control it. Disordered thoughts of any kind he couldn't seem to control. But, up to that point at least, he had mostly managed to keep depression at bay. Perhaps writing in his journal would improve his frame of mind.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

At Susan's front door I cleaned off my wheels with the rag I carry for that purpose and rang the bell. I made sure it was exactly six forty-five. It was a ground level entry patio, meaning there were no steps to navigate.

Her mother answered and invited me inside. I sat in the entry hall for only a moment before Susan came down the stairs – just like in the movies. She looked beautiful – just like in the movies. She was wearing a dress – I'd never seen her in a dress before – beige with dark brown stitching and short sleeves with brown cuffs. She wore white knee socks and beige sneakers. I had to wonder if any teen boy in the history of teen boys had ever noticed that much about what his date was wearing. As promised, there around her neck was a bright red scarf – silk, I thought from the way it shone in the light.

I told her mother I'd have her home by eleven. That

seemed satisfactory. She took a picture. We left. I told her she looked pretty (Susan, not her mother, although she is really pretty for a mother).

Milton opened the back door of the car and helped Susan inside. She scooted across the seat and I slid in beside her. Milton stowed my chair in the trunk. It seemed silly to ride just four blocks, but that was what we did. We got some looks as we entered the gym together, but I was used to getting looks at new places. They didn't continue long. That was a nice thing about nice kids. I should write more about that later. Susan walked beside me with her hand on my right shoulder. It seemed just right to me. It was as if she was claiming me for everybody to see. I tried to manage a look of pride to confirm it was my position as well.

We began with punch and sat along one wall for several minutes. We talked – it was more awkward than I had expected it would be. Date talk at a dance seemed to be in some ways different from friends talk on the lawn.

She introduced me to several couples I hadn't known. That part went well and we both relaxed. At a few minutes after seven, the band began playing. The first song was slow. I felt more confident about slow dances than fast dances so suggested we give it a whirl. I decided not to prepare her about the mechanics of dancing with a wheelchair, but just let it all get started. It worked well – like it had with Abby. Again, we got a few initial looks, but none of them lingered and before long we were just one more couple out on the floor. That was nicer than I can possibly find words to express.

The first dance went quite well. When it ended, we found ourselves out in the middle of the floor. Everybody clapped – for the band, I suppose. We clapped. I was new to all that. The next song began immediately. It was a fast dance.

Susan looked at me as if to ask for some direction – move back to the seats or what? I began to dance. Fast dances require very little physical contact between the boy and girl. She joined right in. She had figured out about using the scarf between us – I have the idea she had practiced using it ahead of time. It was amazing how well it worked. I could tell she was having fun. I knew I was.

We stayed on the floor through the first half dozen dances before taking a break. More punch and a cookie apiece. I could have eaten a dozen. With the pre-date butterflies, I had been off my feed at dinner time. We talked with several couples. It was the girls that seemed to be her friends. We guys managed the small talk thing okay I think even though we had never spoken before. They were clearly interested in Betsy even though they didn't ask. I initiated the grand tour making their interest legitimate. They seemed to appreciate that and asked questions. I joked about rotating the tires and changing the oil every 2,000 miles. That seemed to relax them about it – and me.

There were other really nice things at the dance, but nothing to write about. Well, there was one pretty nice thing that happened just as we were leaving. One the main football players came over and offered me a high five. He said, "You were frickin' awesome out there!"

I certainly hadn't expected that and didn't know how to respond. I had never been called 'frickin'' anything before – at least not to my face in a positive way. I said something like, 'thanks'. (Upon reflection, that actually seemed quite appropriate! Who knew?)

"We walked home. I didn't know what to expect when we got to her front door and felt nervous about it. I kept wiping my palms on my pants to keep them from being sweaty if we held hands. The front yard light was off. It had been on earlier when we left. That seemed odd to me – but only for a moment. It came to me that it had been arranged for piracy. A conspiracy between Mother and daughter, no doubt. Each of them was difficult enough to figure out separately. Together would very likely be impossible. I chose not to ponder it further at that moment.

I reached out my hand – palm up, thinking we would do our 'hand sandwich' thing that she seemed to like. She leaned down and kissed me – not on the forehead – not on the cheek – smack dab on my lips. I admired her perfect aim. I think I kissed her back. It's hard to know what is entailed in a kiss-back. It didn't last long. Long enough to know she had soft lips and to smell her hair close up. I am certain I will enjoy practicing getting better at the kiss-back thing.

I hadn't thought about the protocol after a kiss. Should I say 'thank you', or 'that was great', or what? I just smiled. She just smiled. She opened the door and paused. Then came back and put her red scarf around my neck. I assumed it was for me to keep – like a souvenir of our first date. She said, "Thanks Rick. It was a great night."

At that point I managed, "It was a great night. Thanks for inviting me."

She said, "See you after school on Monday?" It came out like a question. I said, "I'm looking forward to it," which I hoped dealt with it – question or statement.

I had been wrong about one thing – before she went inside, she removed the scarf from my neck.

If Milton is to be believed, I think I really may have had mankind's first absolutely perfect first date. I wonder if the Guinness Book of World Records has a category for that.

On the way home I got stopped – accosted – by one of the men who have been following me. It was very frightening, but it was also a really good thing. I am more certain than ever that they are real and not just some figment of my demented mind.

At least two odd things came of it. First, the main bad guy – I'll call him Limp Man – implied that we knew each other – that it had not been the first time we had met. It is one of several things I will be looking into. Father suggested it must have been a case of mistaken identity, as if to say I might not have been the intended 'target' or whatever. At the same time it appears that both father and Milton doubt that the incident really happened – well, really happened except inside my head.

The second thing has two parts. Crutch Man came to my rescue. He called me Tommy. His appearance there at that moment meant he had to have either been following me or following Limp Man. When I looked back after following Crutch Man's advice and moving on, Limp Man was laid out on the street. I don't know if that was the result of my blow to his head with my flashlight or something Crutch Man did after I left. Crutch Man was no longer in sight by the time I looked back.

But now, the really confusing part. When Crutch Man

first appeared, my level of fright escalated into terror immediately. It could have been because for those first seconds I thought there were suddenly two bad guys after me – right there, together. I had the idea the other night at the bridge that they might be working together. Crutch Man's appearance out of nowhere seemed to confirm that – during those first seconds, I mean.

But there is something more than that. It has me downright bewildered. Limp Man really was scary. I understood it was very likely that something terrible was about to happen to me. But there was something about Crutch Man that was even more frightening even as I came to understand that he seemed to be there to protect me. To this moment, I am more terrified by my memory of Crutch Man – my protector – than by that of Limp Man – my assailant. I mean ten times more terrified. From any reasonable viewpoint that does seem crazy – fearing my savior more than my attacker. I don't get it and that really bothers me. Such illogic is usually reserved for the mentally ill. I must be missing some huge piece of this puzzle. When I characterize it as a puzzle, that way, I do feel some better – less definitely crazy, I suppose.

Apparently, Milton went back to investigate after I got home. According to him, there was no evidence of the incident. If Limp Man came to and drove off and Crutch Man had already left I suppose there wouldn't be anything left to mark the spot. I had my belt and flashlight. If he picked up his bat there would be nothing left. I need to go back and look it over. I don't know what I'll be looking for.

I am going through some of father's papers that I think pertain to my life before he adopted me hoping they can shed light on several things. My original name for one. I guess I'm not certain what else.

Father seems convinced these threatening things I've been experiencing are not really happening. I didn't get the idea he thinks I'm lying about it. I think he believes I'm off my rocker – feeling and seeing things that aren't there – shouldn't be there, can't be there. He made me an appointment with Dr. Wilson. I haven't seen him for over six months. That's mainly because I stopped talking about my 'problems' here at home, so I guess father figured they'd gone away.

Dr. Wilson always thought it was all just in my head. It's the main reason I sabotaged my relationship with him. At the time, I also began to wonder if somebody was paying him to make me go crazy – he made me concentrate on my fears, did things that made me angry, and he kept pointing out to me how incompetent I am. I haven't figured who would benefit from that – me going crazy. Perhaps somebody who would inherit father's money if I weren't around. A long lost relative maybe. I don't have any information about such a person. Milton and Abby, maybe, but that, of course, is absurd.

That's all most likely hokum, but just the idea of being forced back to that doctor's office makes me angry. I imagine it will be uncomfortable to see him again. I'm older now and intend to stick up for myself. Regardless, I don't want to go.

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Chapter Six: \$400 AN HOUR. REALLY?

Ricky felt better after writing. It was still only nine o'clock with lots of Saturday left before his appointment. He put his jacket on his lap and went in search of Milton who was having coffee with Abby in the Kitchen. They had both lost their mates early in life and Ricky had always figured someday the two of them would get together. Early on he tried to encourage it, but later figured he should just let nature take its course. It did seem to him that Nature, in its grand scheme of things, often lost sight of the fact that an individual human being's time was a more fleeting thing than a mountain or an ocean.

"Milton. I need a favor. I need to go back down the street and look things over for myself. I want you to be there as my witness in the unlikely event I actually find something to support my story. Will you help me?"

"Of course, and I hope you know that I hope you do find something."

"Thanks for that."

They took the sidewalk. It was a typical October day – cool and gloomy even in the presence of a sun playing peek-a-boo in and among the clouds. They stopped a few yards before arriving at the actual spot where – at least in Ricky's mind – the events had played out. Milton stood back having decided it was Ricky's search and he'd wait to receive orders or suggestions or questions.

Ricky pointed to the narrow berm – two feet of grass between the sidewalk and the curb.

"Tell me what you see there."

Milton walked to the spot and bent slightly as if to get a better view and demonstrate his genuine commitment.

"I see two tire tracks like ones that Betsy could well have laid down."

"Describe them, please."

"Well, they go directly toward the curb at a ninety-degree angle from the sidewalk, is that what you mean?"

"That's it. The sort of path I'd take if I had stopped and turned toward the street before moving on. If I'd have been crossing the street, like for a short cut, my tracks would have appeared how?"

"Well, let me think," Milton began. "I imagine they would have taken off at an angle to save time – fulfilling the implied purpose of a short cut, I suppose."

Ricky took pictures with his phone. He navigated down the curb and went out into the street several yards beyond the tracks. He moved around slowly, sweeping back and forth systematically, as if to cover every square inch of that section of the old cement street.

"Ah, Ha! Come and look here."

"Again, he pointed."

"That black blotch?" Milton asked.

"Yes! That *fresh* black blotch. When blood dries on a nonabsorbent surface it turns black. Here's my pocket knife and a little paper envelope. After I get a picture will you see if you can scrape up a sample of whatever that is and put it in the envelope?"

That accomplished, with greater ease than either anticipated, Ricky took a second picture that showed where the scraping had been removed.

"You should know, I suppose," Milton began, "that whatever it was, has not thoroughly dried yet – it was a bit pliable you could say."

"Write that on the envelope, will you?"

Milton made the note.

"Look there," Ricky said, pointing for a third time.

He rolled to the far side of the street.

"Can you tell if that's fresh oil, like what might have recently leaked out of a dirty, white, van?"

Milton got all the way down on his knees, leaning over to sniff the spot.

"It certainly does appear to be car oil. I'm afraid my sniff didn't reveal body type or color. I should probably get a sample?"

It had been a statement that had been offered like a question. Milton was coming on board. He scraped up a large sample and put it into another envelope. The oil had mixed with the dust and dirt on the surface and formed a mud-like consistency. Ricky took several more pictures in that spot.

"See how that oil is only in that one spot. No oil spots on either side of it for at least ten yards. See the sign: cars aren't allowed to park along the street in this block. Does all that suggest it came from a temporarily parked vehicle and not one just dripping along the street here?"

"I would say that is what it indicates. Yes."

Ricky placed the sample envelopes inside a larger one and slipped it into the carrying case on the rear of his chair. He looked around toward the walls and houses.

"I imagine there are a number of surveillance cameras out there, like the ones we have. Later I can come back and knock on a few doors. I've seen enough to feel confident I really had that encounter right here last night. Thanks for coming with me. You've always been my go to guy, you know. I've probably never thanked you for always being here for me."

"I would not have it any other way. You've done your share for me, as well, you know."

Ricky had never looked at it that way. It seemed to solidify their bond even further.

They started back to the house.

"I kissed her, well, I guess technically she kissed me. I'm looking forward to more. It was nice. I'm pretty sure it was one of those 'less is better than more' things you mentioned. I really like her."

"And it would seem she likes you – initiating the kiss the way you described it."

"I suppose that's right. Hadn't thought about it like that. My lips could never have reached hers from down in my chair. I guess she sensed that."

"Ricky, one of the facts of life I didn't cover in our talk is this: females sense *everything*. Accept that, don't question it, learn to live with it, and life with the fairer sex will become a far less stressful."

At the first crosswalk Ricky pulled to a stop.

"Don't be obvious about it, but down the cross street to our right, almost to the end of the block on the other side, see that white van parked facing the other way?"

Milton bent as if to adjust something on the wheelchair and managed a prolonged look.

"GH46578," he said before straightening up.

"Got it. License number. In-state you think?"

"Right colors. I'd say so," Milton said. "What do you suppose its business might be down there?"

"Several possibilities," Rick said. He had already been thinking about it. "It might be where Limp Man lives. It might be that it's set up inside to spy on me through the large dark windows in the rear doors. It might be delivering, White Van Pizza."

Milton nodded, offering a slight smile without comment.

"Wish I had my good camera along. I'd get a close up of that plate."

"Do you recall seeing that van on more than that one occasion?" Milton asked as they moved on across the street in order to make their presence seem reasonable – just in case their presence needed to be made to seem reasonable to someone.

"Not except for last night, but then ogling dirty old white vans has never been high on my 'must pay attention to list', I suppose."

They were soon home.

After a brief stop in the kitchen for fresh peach cobbler, Ricky went to his room to begin homework. He had several chapters to read, a book to finish for a report in English, and an article to write for the paper. He enjoyed all those things so looked forward to the next few hours.

His father called at eleven just to check in. They spoke for several minutes. Neither mentioned the night before nor the appointment. It was the first-time Ricky had the opportunity to mention the work he was doing for the city

website. That seemed to please his father. He mentioned a book he had read as a child on the topic, and offered the reference, thinking it might helpful.

After a late lunch – dictated by the late bed time, the late breakfast and the late snack – Ricky dressed for his appointment. He slipped his camera into his carrying case just in case the van showed up again.

Dr. Wilson's office was clear down town on the fifteenth floor of a fairly new office building. Ricky figured a sizeable chunk of the \$400 an hour his father was forking over to the man must have gone for rent. He was certain *he* could have put that money to better use – feeding hungry kids or buying medicine for sick, homeless people. Heck, in his estimation, buying candy for kids with bad teeth would have even been better. In the past, such suggestions had been met with a smile, but no comment, from his father. He doubted even a smile would have been launched that day.

Ricky felt uncomfortable in fancy, expensive surroundings and that included most of his own house. Dr. Wilson had helped him understand that might stem from the very simple house and furnishings he had grown accustomed to as a small boy. It was one thing 'Doc' had said that made sense – was helpful, even. He figured that made it one out of a thousand things. A quick calculation told Ricky that one insight had cost his father about forty grand.

Ricky knew how the session would begin. Dr. Wilson would ask, "How have you been?" Ricky would answer, "Pretty good." Dr. Wilson would ask, "Anything particular on your mind today?" Ricky would look around the office and say something like, "All the hungry kids, the wars in the middle-east, gang shootings on the north side . . ." Dr. Wilson would ignore all that, and suggest some topic he thought was important, "Tell me about things that have frightened you this week."

Like usual, Dr. Wilson was running behind schedule. Ricky took his seat in the office at 3:15.

"How have you been, Ricky?"

"Pretty good."

"Anything particular on your mind today?"

"All the hungry kids, the wars in the middle-east, gang

shootings on the north side . . .”

“Your father says you related an incident that happened on a street near your home a few nights ago.”

“Did he?”

“I’d like for you to tell me about it.”

“I’d like to be at home building a website page for the city, but that’s not happening either.”

“You seem angrier with me than usual, today.”

“You got that, did you?”

“I’m just here to try and help you.”

“No, you’re here to try and convince me I’m nuts and I’m not. I have pretty reliable proof that things really happened the other night just the way I related them.”

“Really! Can you share that with me?”

“Why. So, you can disassemble it and demonstrate why it’s all a bunch of hogwash like you’ve always done?”

Both Ricky and Dr. Wilson were surprised at the new-found boldness Ricky was demonstrating. Inside, each of them was pleased though they chose not to indicate it. Despite his doubts that it would help, Ricky laid out what he and Milton had found. Dr. Wilson chose to make notes on his pad rather than respond. Unusual!

Ricky went on to also outline his two encounters on the walker’s bridge, figuring he’d deliver the whole picture. Then he fired the big revelation.

“I hope you will be honest with me on this. Was my original first name, Tommy?”

Dr. Wilson became clearly uncomfortable. ‘How wonderful,’ Ricky thought, ‘the shrinks squirming instead of me. Perhaps I should charge *him* for that.’

“That is the type of thing you’ll need to discuss with your father.”

“I tried. He responded by sending me to see you.”

“Where did that name come from?” the doctor asked.
“What prompted you to ask your father about it?”

“Crutch Man called me, Tommy, when he appeared and began protecting me.”

“I see. It could be mistaken identity.”

“You and father put your heads together and come up with that answer together?”

Ricky folded his arms and sat quietly for the next three hundred dollars' worth of the session.

He had nothing to report to Milton on the ride home. Milton never asked about the sessions; neither did Abby, but Ricky assumed she had been threatened into it – or *out* of it, might be more accurate. Abby not asking questions about something was fully contrary to her basic makeup – like a fish not swimming or a bird not flying or a baby not crying – or, Dr. Wilson not driving Ricky out of hit gourd.

Back in his room he tried to study with no success. His mind wandered to the incident, to the session, to the evidence gathering and the second van sighting that morning. Mostly, things wandered through his mind as questions prompted by the information he had removed from his father's files.

He closed his book, placed the pile of papers from his night stand on his study table and began going through them sheet by sheet. He was a fast reader, but even so it was going to take a long time. Pages filled with single spaced legalize set in 8 point fonts made for lots of difficult reading.

He began skipping some of them when he could see they didn't relate the topics with which he was concerned. He found his original birth certificate. Like he had come to suspect during those past 48 hours his birth name was, Thomas Anderson, with no middle name specified. It held his correct birthdate and listed Mary Kay Barton Anderson as his mother and Donald Thomas Anderson as his father. He had weighed seven pounds and three ounces. He would look up statistics later to see how those things stacked up with babies in general. It said he was male. *That*, Ricky could verify was still true. The thought produced a chuckle and created one of his odd associations: A woman letter carrier would be a 'fe-mail man'. Odd, yes.

His reaction to the original name fascinated him. 'It had been Tommy, *but that wasn't right* – it was *really* Ricky.' He assumed Dr. Wilson would say that was a healthy way to look at it. Why everybody was being so secretive about it bothered and puzzled him, especially because his father had always been honest and up front with him. It appeared he had been given his dad's middle name as his first. That seemed nice, in a detached sort of way.

That pretty well milked the birth certificate of all it had to offer – well, there was the indication in the lower right corner that it was Form ‘BCSP2000’. Ricky was an exceptional observer of details. He imagined that stood for Birth Certificate, SPringfield, printed in the year 2,000.

There were a few other documents relating to his early years – vaccination records and his mother’s diploma from the City College. That was a pleasant surprise. For some reason, he just held it and looked at it for some time. It said things to him about her intelligence and wisdom and life goals he hadn’t known. He also found his parents’ marriage license. It was signed by a minister and dated almost twelve months before he was born. That didn’t surprise him, but for some reason it brought a sense of relief. It told him they had married out of love and not necessity. Realistic or not, it made him feel more authentic – being born of a couple that followed the old values. He couldn’t decipher the feeling further than that.

He put that aside and searched on. The papers from the second folder began to provide interesting information. There were copies of his biological father’s military discharge papers – *honorable with medical anomalies*. A nice way of saying he was crazy without saying it, Ricky figured. Although, anomalies was plural. There could have been something in addition to that.

There were also records of his dad’s admission to a VA psychiatric hospital that sat on the south side of town. The entry date was the same as the discharge date. He found no diagnosis of his dad’s condition although somewhere along the line he had picked up on the fact it had been PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder.

Ricky had researched that condition some years before. The typical symptoms were extreme anxiety and even out of control emotionally laden hallucinations associated with earlier traumatic events – often things witnessed during combat. Sometimes he wondered if that was also his own diagnosis – some traumatic experience from his childhood causing him to see things and feel terrors that weren’t there or were no longer there, at least. Perhaps he and his dad had something in common – they were *both* crazy. For some reason that seemed more funny than sad to him.

He felt a good deal of compassion for the man. Still, he understood why, if he was prone to violent outbursts, his son should have been protected from him. It seemed unfair to both of them – dad not being able to know his son and son not being able to know his dad.

The majority of the papers from that second file related to the adoption and things surrounding it. Ricky read a stapled set of nearly two dozen pages from start to finish, each outlining or chronicling some special aspect of the process. He discovered that Jonathon's first two attempts at adopting him had been denied. There were court documents that declared his biological father – Donald – an unfit parent and severed custody from him after his mother had died. There was a restraining order issued to keep his father from coming within 100 yards of Tommy/Ricky until such time as Donald had been cured of his disorder.

In one of the papers from the Army it mentioned a physical disability as well. It was not described further than that, but indicated PT (physical therapy) had been a significant part of his treatment. From his personal experience with PT, Ricky understood that could involve virtually any part of the body. PT had a dependably high 'cure' rate. He hoped that had been the case for his father.

Immediately after his mother's death, Tommy/Ricky's uncle – his mother's brother – had applied to be his guardian. That was denied, again on the basis of physical and mental incompetency. Eventually, Jonathon was granted custody, then guardianship, and finally adoption. That suggested he had to prove himself capable of being a good father, not just that he could afford the expenses involved in raising a crippled child. It was the first-time Ricky had learned of the sequence of events involved in his adoption. He figured it must have cost his father or grandfather a huge amount of money.

It also raised questions about Jonathon's motivation for the adoption. There was never any blood relationship mentioned between his mother and Jonathon. There was that rumor about his grandfather's will, but he found nothing relating to that among the papers he had borrowed. That just didn't seem like his father – to adopt him in order to get the inheritance. Nothing about it felt right. They had a loving

personal connection not one based on greed. His father was a wealthy man in his own right. He didn't need an inheritance.

There was a brown envelope. It contained several items. One was a folded newspaper article about the accident with a picture of cars still entangled at the intersection. The caption above the picture read: *Mother Killed by Hit and Run Driver. Son Hanging to Life*. The new elements for Ricky included the street address at which they were living at the time and the hospital to which he had been taken. It was reported his mother had died instantly at the scene. He was glad she hadn't had to suffer or have time to worry about how he would be cared for. It said his condition was so critical that he was not expected to live – he lost a huge percentage of his blood and was put on an IV on the spot. At the end, as if an afterthought, his biological dad's name was listed along with his address. It was a local address on the East side so it couldn't have been the hospital. Ricky didn't understand how that could have been if he had still been hospitalized. The other papers suggested that would have been the case. Ricky had to wonder if it was a hit-and-run, why were there pictures of wrecked cars. Perhaps, the driver had forced the others to swerve into each other and then sped off, himself or herself.

He decided it was time for another fieldtrip. He jotted down the addresses and went to commandeer Milton.

“Abby. Know where Milton is?”

“Dusting in the living room. I’m sure he will be happy to be rescued if you have a better offer.”

“We’ll be out for a couple of hours or so, Okay?”

“You two are being very secretive today. Things all right?”

“Fine. Can we put dinner off until seven?”

He and Milton were soon headed across town to the east side. On occasions like that, Ricky always sat up front with Milton.

“Grand Street crosses Main. I looked it up on Google. The address is 3045 Grand Street.”

“That has been some years ago,” Milton pointed out. “Lots of new construction in that area. The building may not even exist anymore.”

“It’s there. I saw it on Google Earth. Looks to be a

three story flop house, now. A terrible section of town.”

“And you wait until now to tell me that? Perhaps I should lock the doors and don body armor.”

They shared a smile.

The trek took nearly a half hour. Theirs was by far the most expensive and latest model car on the block.

“Is this a drive by or a stop and walk?” Milton asked.

“There’s a place to park right in front of the building. Let’s pull in and think about things.”

They parked and sat for a moment observing the area.

“Looks more run down close up than it did on Google. I’d like to go in and see if he still lives there.”

“There are six, angry looking, cement steps,” Milton pointed out. “Perhaps I could go and make the inquiry to speed us out of this area.”

“Okay, I guess. If you’re not back in three minutes I’m calling the Mounties.”

Milton got out, climbed the uncomfortably sized steps and disappeared inside. Ricky made plans in case something went wrong. He had his thumb on the 911 speed dial key. Three minutes passed. Four. Five. Ricky was ready to make a move. Milton reappeared, looking no worse for wear.

Back inside the car he shared what he had learned.

“Well, a man called Donny has lived here off and on. Currently it is off. The man at the desk said he hasn’t seen him in six months or more. I have no idea if his word can be trusted.”

“Did you get a description?”

“No. His memory faded fast when specifics were involved. I’m thinking a fist full of twenties might have loosened his tongue, however.”

“We can hold that for a ploy in the future if it’s needed. Now, let’s look up my old neighborhood. Just gathering data today.”

He snapped several pictures and they moved out onto the street. It was another thirty-minute ride.

“Do you suppose the area was this run down when mom and I lived here?”

“I don’t have to suppose. I know. And yes it was.”

“You’ve been here, before?”

"I must admit that I have. I promised your father – Jonathon – that I would never disclose it to you. I didn't and yet here we are."

He smiled.

Ricky nodded into Milton's face indicating that he understood about divided loyalties.

"There is the house, looking just about like it did twelve years ago," Milton said pointing.

He pulled to the curb and stopped across the street. They sat quietly for several minutes.

"Nothing about it seems familiar to me," Ricky said, clearly disappointed. "I had hoped something would spark a flood of wonderful childhood memories."

"I'm sorry," Milton said.

"At least it didn't cause a terror attack. I see that as positive."

Ricky pointed on down the street indicating it was time to leave. They did. He wasn't sure that anything he had learned there might be of any help. In some ways, however, he felt more connected to his past and that seemed to have made the trips worthwhile.

Chapter Seven: ROADTRIPS

At dinner, in the kitchen, Ricky had a question for the other two: "What can you tell me about my uncle, Carl Barton – my mom's brother?"

"It appears you've been doing some research," Milton said looking more at Abby than Ricky who intentionally kept his head down, looking into his plate while he squashed the final few peas onto his fork.

"I also know my mom's name was Mary Kay and my dad's Donald. Google is a great resource."

Although the first statement had not really been in any way connected to the second, both were true. If the others chose to misconstrue the 'unintended' connection as his source of information, that would have to be their problem – at least for the time being.

Milton nodded to Abby. She spoke.

"We really don't know much about Carl. We understand that he unsuccessfully attempted to gain guardianship of you after your mother's death. He seems to be the black sheep of that side of your family."

She stopped and looked over at Milton as if for agreement to continue. He nodded.

"This is a rumor – and that's how I present it to you. We've heard that Carl tried to arrange with your father – Jonathon – that for a payment to him of some large amount of money, he would withdraw his attempt to gain custody of you, freeing the way for Jonathon. We believe your father did not give in, since he surely knew a man with Carl's reputation

would never be awarded custody. Apparently, Carl became outraged and waylaid your father, administering a terrible beating. Much of it was caught on surveillance cameras. Carl was caught, tried, and convicted and sent to prison for ten years."

"So he would have been released from jail two years ago?"

Milton did some figuring on his fingers.

"Yes. About that. I don't know exact dates surrounding all of that."

"How badly was father hurt?"

"He spent a number of days in the hospital," Milton said. "That was some months before you came to live with us, of course."

"I understand from civics class that in this state the person having been the target of a crime is notified when the perpetrator is released from prison. Do you know if father received word of that?"

"Truthfully, we do not," Milton said. "Even if we did, you would need to get that sort of information directly from your father."

"I understand. I know I've been pressing the envelope pretty hard this evening. Our conversations will never reach father's ears from me. One more thing if you feel it's appropriate. Do you know what my dad – Donald – did for a living? I know he was in the army, but I mean before or after that."

Again, it was Abby providing the information.

"I suppose you will find out. Donald was never a very good provider. He had trouble keeping jobs. He worked a lot in the food business – restaurant kitchens, bakeries, caterers, places like that. The story is that he made the cake for the Mayor's inauguration some twenty years ago."

"If he was that good I wonder why he couldn't keep a job."

"Since his release from the service I have to believe it is in some way connected to his emotional problems, although I don't really know that," Milton went on. "Before then he just flat out drank too much. He joined the army when, after a weeklong drunken rampage he inflicted nearly a quarter of a

million dollars' worth of damage on various things around town – windows, vehicles, buildings, people. As we understand it the judge gave him a choice; "Join up or go to prison for ten years." I feel certain you never saw him again after that."

"Do you know anything about how he became so traumatized during the war?"

"We don't. Your father may have some information about that. We do know that he was held as a prisoner of war for a period of time."

It wasn't often that Ricky passed on Abby's pineapple upside down cake, but that evening he did. He went right up to his room and got on the web. He wanted to know more about those two other men that had once been a part of his life.

He began the search for his uncle Carl. It didn't take long. Nine years into his sentence he was killed in prison in a major exercise yard brawl. It involved gangs unhappy with each other about something. Carl had been collateral damage. Apparently, his cell mate was also attacked and barely survived. That certainly took Uncle Carl out of the present-day equation. He imagined his father had been notified of that, but chose not to share it with Abby and Milton.

He went to the County Assessor's web site and after a good deal of searching found who currently owned the house he and his mother had lived in – Martin Williams. From what Ricky had seen, it was a dump that couldn't have cost very much. It had been purchased just six months before. Another dead end.

He tried to find some evidence of his dad's – Donald's – current whereabouts. He searched lots of sites, but the name didn't come up. Well, there were four dozen Donald Anderson's out there in the state, but none that had the markings of being his dad. In what he thought was a stroke of genius, Ricky placed a call to the VA Hospital and, in the deepest voice he could pull from his fifteen-year-old vocal chords, asked to speak with Donald Anderson – "I think his room number begins with four."

He had added that to make it seem authentic. It must have, because the woman on the other end of the line did a search, but found nobody by that name.

"You understood I wanted a patient and not an employee, right?" he asked thinking he needed to clarify.

"Yes. I understood. Sorry I couldn't be of any help. Oh, wait one minute, Sir. Suddenly that name rings a bell. Let me look . . . Yes. Donald Anderson was here, but he was transferred to a special hospital in Westville that deals particularly with his problem. That took place about seven months ago. I can give you the switchboard number of that facility."

She offered the number and Ricky took it down.

He thanked her. Probably not enough he decided as he thought back on it. She had been far kinder and more helpful than Ricky had been led to believe workers at places like that would be. He decided not to call the other hospital until he thought it through more thoroughly. If he was five hundred miles away there was no chance he could arrange a meeting without getting his father involved and he wasn't ready for that, yet.

It suddenly seemed that he was both closer to and further away from finding his dad – if such a thing was possible. He figured writing in his journal might help him put some things in proper perspective – well, at least in *some* sort of perspective if not 'proper'.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

I've let this search for people who are irrelevant to my current problem get in the way. After I heard about my father's problems with Uncle Carl, I figured that after he got out of prison he might try something either to settle a score or make another move to improve his financial situation. Kidnapping me might achieve that. That could have been related to all this, but one dead uncle equals nada, zip, zilch on that count.

I'm back to the two men I do know exist in the here and now. One is clearly out to harm me. Oddly that gives me a sense of relief. At least I know that one thing for sure, now. Limp Man equals danger. I'm still not sure about the other one. It seemed he was coming to my rescue the other night, but what if he figured he had dibs on me – to hurt or use me or whatever, himself – so he was just saving me to do his thing

with me later?

Add to that my reaction when I first saw him. Even though I didn't get anything like a clear look at his face (I'm talking about Crutch Man), I became terrified when I looked at him. Terrified about the guy trying to help me??? Makes no sense. My brain can take the simplest thing and turn it into some big hairy complex brain teaser. He tried to help me. He did help me. I should just leave it at that and stop worrying about his presence in my life. It's him I've seen the most during the past several months. He's never made a move to harm me. Scare the bejeebers out of me, but not harm me.

At any rate and whatever their motives, they are both still out there in the world and I can't avoid being out there in the world. That seems to make me fair game for one or both of them. If both of them, however, it now seems it is really each of them alone. When Crutch Man shined his flashlight up at Limp Man on the bridge, it seems now it wasn't a signal of cooperation, but a message for him to get the heck out of there and keep his mitts off me. (I'm sounding more and more like a late night, black and white, gangster movie!)

The bat, which the Limp Man was yielding, made a pretty impressive weapon. I think I will make a holster on my rig just wide enough and deep enough to carry one of my bats. I can cap it somehow so nobody will see what's in there. I'll feel safer. The other night I had left my whistle at home during the dance. I won't do that again.

I think I'll ask Milton if he'll go in search of surveillance tapes. Ours is a 48-hour system. Four cameras, four angles, 48 hours of recording time each. Then we either insert a new DVD or set the program to record over the old data. Father saves ours for two weeks. I assume most of the others in this area are like that, too. We all belong to a neighborhood association. We need to get to them soon or the data could be gone – may already be gone. I think a distinguished looking older gentleman will probably have better success obtaining the recordings than a kid. All the long-term residents in the neighborhood have known Milton since the Dark Ages.

Tomorrow I want to go back to the intersection where my accident happened when I was three. I've thought about it

before, but now it's become something I really need to do. I suppose Dr. Wilson would be proud of me – facing my fears, at least a possible fear in this case. I suppose I won't know if it is a fear until I get there. I should have done it today when we were over in that section of town. For some reason, I didn't even think about it. Doc would try to make me believe that was because part of my mind doesn't want to have to relive that experience. Who knows? He may be right.

[Pause]

I was just trying to envision Crutch Man in my mind. Although it was dark on Friday night, I should have gotten a good image of his face. He was no more than fifteen feet away from me – face-on while he spoke to me. I got no image in my head whatsoever. I can see his head, just no features. What I did get was an immediate jolt of terror – dread and panic – as those feelings commandeered my chest. Either it is something about his face that I am blocking out or something else about him – the crutch? His slouch? His gravelly voice (it was the first time I've heard it.)? I got nothin', as the saying goes. (At least I think that's a saying. If it wasn't, it is now.)

I can conjure up a pretty good image of Limp Man. He was filthy for one thing – face, clothing. He wore an old sports team jacket – silver and black with a black 'A' on it. The zipper was busted – at least it hung open. One pocket was torn. His jeans were baggy and too long. The bottoms of them were ragged – shredded – like they had been stepped on over and over. He had shoulder length black hair and wore a baseball cap backwards. I hate that. Makes a person look like some kind of an ignorant thug. (They probably think wearing them frontwards makes me look like some kind of jerk. We truly are an odd species – human beings.)

The white van is old and also filthy. Looked like some kids had written 'wash me' on the side of it with their fingers. It had large windows in the rear door – the darkened kind that one can see out of but not into. There were no other windows in the back. Since there was no side door on the street side I imagine maybe a sliding door on the curb side. The front fender area on the driver's side had portions rusted away. The two tires I could see appeared to have almost no tread on

them. I need to get that plate number run – the one that Milton got. What was it? GH46578. Not sure how to do that without involving the police and I'm not ready to do that. Don't know why, but I'm not.

* * *

His writing was interrupted by a familiar knock at his door.

“Open!” he called, looking up and smiling.

It was Milton, a piece of the pineapple goodie from dinner and a glass of milk on a tray.

“I was certain I received a telepathic message from up here just a few moments ago,” Milton said, smiling.”

“That's a huge slice,” Ricky said.

“And that's the reason for two forks. When you said you didn't want any at dinner, Abby decided not to serve it at all. I have dessert needs, too, you know.”

“You could have asked. I'm sure she'd have seen to you.”

“Yes. But, that would not have provided me with an excuse to come and see you.”

“You've never needed an excuse before. What's really up?”

Milton set down the tray on Ricky's study table.

“It is an unlikely, though fascinating tale. I think I will need to sit.”

Ricky pulled a chair around to one end of the table. Milton sat. As was their long-standing ritual during late evening snacks they raised there forks and clinked them as if in a toast. That done, Ricky attacked his side of the dessert. Milton laid his fork aside and began to talk.

“It seems that late this afternoon while we were out, you received a call from someone named Jake. Abby took the call and you know Abby. Ten minutes later she had pried from his tender mind his life story, family history, and most likely his underwear size. Anyway – and this is the unlikely part – your young friend, Jake – who you are apparently tutoring on the finer points of wheel chair prowess – is the grandson of an acquaintance of mine – he and their butler and I occasionally play Bocce Ball together at the park at 9th and Holly.”

Ricky furrowed his brow unable to see any relevance to

anything other than butlers' days off. Milton reassured him.

"Hear me out. The grandfather, who I also know, is a retired police captain. I took the liberty of calling him, explaining the connection between his grandson and you and therefore with me and told him we had a bit of a sticky wicket going on."

"Sticky wicket?" Ricky asked, shaking his head and frowning.

"A term I've picked up from my English Butler associates. It means a problem with no easy route to an answer."

"Interesting, actually," Ricky said. "Go on."

"I explained that we had a license plate number and needed to know to whom it belonged and an address if possible. He said that was no problem for him and he would be calling back with the information still this evening. By the way, Jake was apparently calling to tell you he and his mother were going out of town and he wouldn't be back at school until Wednesday. He felt it was important for you to know that."

Ricky's face brightened and he nodded.

"It appears I'm his only friend – unfortunately, I'm thinking probably the only friend he's ever had. It was nice of him, actually. I would have been concerned if he hadn't shown up after school on Monday. He is one of those who the bullies could stuff in a locker and he wouldn't be missed for days. It's a coincidence, really. I was wondering about that plate number as you were knocking – see, it's about the last thing I put in my journal."

He turned the book as if to prove the truth of his contention.

"A journal? Not so long ago you swore you'd never keep one again. I believe your exact phrase included a next to impossible suggestion about where Dr. Wilson could stuff it."

Ricky smiled and chuckled.

"This one is for me. I'm using it to try and sort out all the stuff that's been happening lately. I hate to admit that anything Dr. Wilson ever suggested might have actually been helpful, but doing it this way – my way – I'm thinking the journal is beginning to be a big help."

Milton's phone rang. He spoke for just a moment. His side of the conversation did not sound hopeful. He hung up.

"It was Brad – Jake's grandfather. It seems the plate was stolen several weeks ago, down in Floral county. That makes it a dead end, I guess."

"To bad, but not a defeat. If it's still on the van it can still identify the van. Anyway, I'm accumulating a lot of information – more observations and questions than answers at this point, but you have to have all the pieces before you can complete the puzzle. Thanks, by the way, for doing that with your friend. I have a question."

"Ricky, you *always* have a question."

They shared a grin.

"How did a police captain come to get rich? Everything about Jake reeks of spoiled rotten rich brat slash grandson."

"The family was filthy rich well before Brad became a policeman – oil, I believe."

"Definitive answer. Thanks. I will try for two. I want to go to the intersection where my accident happened. You know which one, I assume."

"I know. Tomorrow morning?"

"First thing, if you're *up* to it – so to speak."

"Not a problem, as you young people say. I'm up to things any time after five thirty a.m., but you know that, of course. I'm actually getting quite a kick out of my new-found role of junior detective."

Ricky nodded that he understood.

"And, for the record, we young people say 'No Problem', or just, 'No Prob'."

Winston tucked the information away for future reference.

They finished the dessert and Milton left with the tray. It was going on ten. Before he turned in, Ricky wanted to jot down – summarize – where he was in the investigation and where he needed to get to.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

1. *Something or things keep terrifying me. I can't specify what they are. I need to find out what that thing or those things are. Unlike Doc, I don't think*

they have their source in my screwed-up mind. I have some proof to support that, now.

2. *There are two men who, up to Friday night, have stayed in the shadows of my life. Limp Man walks with a limp. He's scary, but not the source of my BIGGEST terror responses. He drives an old white van that leaks oil and he seems to make no attempt to really hide it from me. I have seen it close by me on several occasions. He tried to force me inside it Friday night. Crutch Man now seems to be trying to protect me, although I wouldn't bet on that yet. He is the one that interests me the most. I can't retain a picture of his face even though I have been plenty close enough to it. And, here's the conundrum – it is he who strikes terror into me. Even now as I'm thinking about him. The good guy terrifies me. That water couldn't get much muddier. If I could only figure out what each of them has to gain from me – from taking me or hurting me or, terrifying me or, I guess, even from protecting me.*
3. *Also, there are two men who seem to be out of my life now, Uncle Carl – dead – and my dad, Donald, in a PTSD treatment center a day's drive away. Maybe knowing those things will allow me to focus better on my problem – just surviving my terrifying panic attacks and, two, finding out what is causing them.*
4. *I went to where mom and I lived. It rang no bells and it produced no even slightly frightening feelings. If anything, it may have produced the tiniest hint of a good or comfortable feeling and that's only upon reflection. That is nice to believe – like one of my very few associations to my mother – good and comfortable.*
5. *More and more I'm convinced that the colors red, white, and blue have something to do with my terror reactions. They are present on the barber pole, the flag and the sailor suit – also, I'm thinking, in the sky during that Fourth of July celebration that sent me into a screaming conniption fit.*

6. *I need to find out what caused all the ruckus at my fourth birthday party. A & M have both warmed up to my ‘investigation’ so I think they will spill the beans about that day.*

There may be more but I’m tired. I just imagine tomorrow will be a big day.

Ricky closed the book, shed his cloths and got into bed. He turned off the lights and closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes and turned on the lights.

He sat up and reached out for the Journal which he kept on his night stand at night.

* * *

JOURNAL ENTRY:

WOW! Something just hit me. Good in that I made a connection that has been eluding me. Bad in that my terror has returned full blown as I sit here right now. I have started sweating and I’m breathing rapidly and shallowly. My heart feels as big as a football and is doing its best to break my ribs and rearrange my internal organs.

The other evening when father and I were eating alone together in the dining room I got all caught up in these same feelings. I was dumbfounded because it was just father and me. I think I hid them from him.

Something just came to me. Father’s tie. It was dark blue to match his suit, but it had red and white flecks in it. When I asked about it he said his secretary had given it to him for his birthday, but it was the first time he had worn it. There it is again – red, white and blue. What does that mean? Grrrrrrrrr! I have no idea.

But, I believe I have explained my terrible reaction that evening in the dining room and that is REALLY great. I was so afraid it had some deep dark something to do with father. But, now I’m quite sure it was just about his tie.”

That realization does nothing to ease this feeling of terror, but it returns a new, more palatable – comfortable – take on father. That is VERY good.

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Chapter Eight

FACES!

The next morning, Ricky was up, showered, dressed and in the kitchen, all by 5:45. Abby had not yet arrived. He took it upon himself to lay out a pound of bacon and get it sizzling on the stove. He broke enough eggs into a bowl to satisfy a platoon of hungry soldiers. He soon had them stirred into a foam. He sat out six slices of bread ready to slip into the toaster. All that was left to do was wait for Milton and Abby.

"Oh. Their coffee," he said out loud as if a reminder to himself.

He did his best to mimic what he had seen Abby do: Four measures of coffee to a full reservoir of water. He punched the button and let the gadget gurgle itself to life and beyond.

It was still dark outside. He rolled to the back door and pushed the window curtains aside to see if there was any indication of sunrise yet. There was, but also something else – the face of man staring in at him not six inches away through the glass pane.

As if by reflex, Ricky pulled down the shade and closed the curtains. He checked the deadbolt and backed away. He couldn't reach the window shades above the sink. He continued backing his way around the table to the hall door and turned off the kitchen lights. There, he secured a broom, which always stood in the open, narrow, closet there. He sat quietly, the back of his chair against the door. The panic grew to such an extreme that he found himself gasping for breath. His temples throbbed and his heart raced. He fumbled for his

phone, fully intending to call 911 for life saving help. There he was, alone. A guy, presumably a bad guy, was no more than one thin pane of glass away, fully prepared, Ricky assumed, to do him some terrible harm.

The door behind him bumped against the back of his chair.

"Milton, I hope," he managed in a whisper.

"Yes. Ricky? What's going on? Why are the lights not on in there?"

Ricky moved forward and Milton entered. He reached for the light switch, but Ricky intercepted his arm.

"Somebody was looking in the backdoor window so I turned them off."

"You get a good look?"

Milton had lowered his voice to match Ricky's.

"Yes and no. It was a man with long hair. It could have been Limp Man. It could have been Crutch Man. It could have been a homeless man looking for a handout or a down on her luck movie actress. I don't know anymore."

Milton went to the door and raised the shade. As they both expected, nobody was there. Ricky flicked on the lights. Abby entered from her quarters, which were off to the south of the kitchen.

"Food smells great. You two look awful. What's up?" she said showing some distress herself.

Ricky explained. She finished tying her apron, leaned up over the sink and drew down the shades.

"Is there a plan?" she said, as she looked over the things Ricky had started on the stove.

"Pray for quick and brilliant sunup, I'd say," Ricky offered.

"Whoever it was is gone," Milton began. "I suggest we get back on schedule. I for one am ready for bacon and eggs with toast and coffee."

"What a coincidence," Abby said. "That's exactly what seems to be preparing itself this morning."

She looked at Ricky.

"You or me – finish up, I mean."

Then she noticed that he was white as a ghost and swallowing hard and often.

"You going to faint?"

"I sure hope not. Guys don't faint."

"We could discuss the accuracy of that statement, but I suggest we defer to a later time," Milton said. "Here. Let me help you get your head down between your legs.

That managed, Ricky immediately started to feel better. His breathing began returning to normal. By the time he sat up, color had returned to his face.

"Sorry about all that," he said. "Not the way you planned on beginning your Sunday morning I'm sure."

"Nor you, yours, I imagine," Abby said.

She had gone ahead and tended to the breakfast while Milton tended to Ricky. Milton helped set things on the table. He poured coffee for the two of them.

"That may be too weak. I wasn't sure if it was four scoops or six," Ricky explained.

"It is two, but who's counting?" Abby said.

"That is stout," Milton added, eyebrows raised, after his first sip.

They took their customary places at the table.

"So, give us a rundown on your vital signs, Ricky."

It had been Milton.

"It was the worst attack I've ever had. I was ready to call 911 when you pushed on the door. I couldn't breathe and my temples really felt like they were going to pop like huge zits. I thought I was going to die. I don't know how much more of this I can take."

He took a deep breath as if to prove to himself he could take a deep breath.

"I guess I do feel much better now. What can I do if that happens again?"

"My advice is for you to let yourself faint. In an unconscious state the panic should cease immediately – since you would be in no condition to think about being frightened. Your respiration should return to normal. We can contact the family doctor to verify that."

"Good idea."

He nodded and paused.

"For some reason this experience brought up something I've been meaning to ask about. You can answer

or not. I understand. That fourth birthday party – why was I removed so quickly up to my room?”

The other two exchanged a glance. Ricky understood there had been a lot of that recently. Abby spoke.

“It was just the four of us, you, your father, Milton and me. Suddenly an intruder came in through the kitchen door and entered the dining room right behind where you were sitting trying your best to blow out the candles. It had become a humorous sight since you had not yet mastered the art of aiming while blowing so I suppose we were doubly startled. Milton and your father met the man and pushed him back into the kitchen and I took you up to your room away from the scuffling.”

“You going to tell me who the man was?”

Another glance was exchanged. It was Milton’s turn.

“Donald – your biological father. He had been drinking, which I guess had given him the courage to do what he did. I actually felt great compassion for him at the moment. He just wanted to share your birthday with you. The courts had effectively removed you from his life. I can understand his anguish and his anger. If he had been sober and cleaned up I can even believe that your father might have allowed him a few minutes with you.”

“He had brought ice cream,” Abby went on. “I guess he figured it couldn’t be a birthday party without ice cream. Like Milton said, we all felt really bad for him. It was the last time he tried to see you as far as we know, I guess.”

Milton nodded as if to confirm that.

“Thank you. Thank you for filling me in and thank you for being so compassionate toward him. I needed to hear that side of his story. It has suddenly restructured my whole relationship with him. It helped me a lot.”

He sat for a moment nodding slowly as if to let the new information – revelation, actually – arrange itself inside him.

“Okay, I need bacon. I need eggs. I need toast. I need coffee.”

The others looked at him with surprise.

“Just kidding about the coffee! Got to test you every so often to see if you’re paying attention.”

They finished breakfast, trying to make it seem

ordinary, although each took his share of furtive glances toward the window in the back door.

* * *

"Here's my plan," Ricky said as he and Milton approached the general area of the crosswalk he was seeking. "Let's park several blocks away. Don't tell me where it is if we cross it. Then we'll make our way to it following the same path mom and I probably took that day. I want to come upon it like it is a surprise so I can't prepare for it. Don't tell me until the final second."

Milton nodded that he understood. They were soon parked and heading north on the sidewalk.

"I'm nervous for some reason, Milton. I didn't expect that."

"Then that's *one* of us who didn't expect it, I guess."

Ricky looked up and smiled. Milton was walking to the boy's left.

"May I make a suggestion for your consideration?"

"Of course. Shoot!" Ricky said slowing the pace a bit.

"How would it be if I were to push your chair, mimicking how your mother was pushing you in your stroller that day?"

"Brilliant. Let's do it. Just don't get any long terms ideas. I take care of myself."

"After twelve years of my association with you I would have *never* guessed that, young man."

They each smiled to themself.

Milton moved behind the wheel chair. Ricky looked around wondering how things might have changed during all that time. Milton set a leisurely pace. They approached an intersection. The walk light lit. Milton began moving them out into the crosswalk.

"This is it, my friend. Right here."

He stopped. Those who had been walking behind them made their ways around, clearly feeling inconvenienced by the abrupt stop. Ricky closed his eyes hoping some vision from the past would be triggered. It wasn't.

"We can go back," he said, "before we actually reenact the accident."

Milton made a U-turn, much to the displeasure of several gesturing motorists who seemed to be missing three

fingers on their right hands.

"Maybe if I sit here a few minutes and just take it all in," Ricky said.

He took control of his chair and backed it up against the corner building more or less out of the way of the passersby. He stared straight ahead out across the street hoping some slip of a memory would flash through his mind.

After five minutes, he was ready to leave, clearly disappointed. He made the return trip home in silence and had opted to ride in the back seat. Milton recognized it was all on the young man – that there was nothing he could do or say that could help in any way at that moment. He understood that as the boy grew older there would be more and more of those times, but that didn't blunt his deep-down desire to help, the way he had with bullies, skinned knees and bee stings.

Ricky understood that, also, and he appreciated Milton's silence.

As they pulled up the driveway and into the garage, Ricky spoke at least one of the things that was on his mind.

"You'd have thought all of that would have dredged something up, wouldn't you?"

There was an undisguised, rising level of anger in his tone.

"I know that was your hope, but first you must remember that normally, boys your age really have virtually no memoires at all from when they were three, and second your young mind was, according to all reports, unconscious from the first seconds of the accident. It very likely had no way to register anything."

Ricky sat forward.

"No! No, it wasn't that way. I got something just then. Two somethings. I registered just a split second of terror and during that same split second the face of somebody looking down at me. Like I said, just a split second. I can feel the fright right now. It is wonderful. I know there was a face, but I don't remember anything more than that. It seems like it might have been a woman's face – long hair. I may be making things up or adding details because more than anything, I want to remember something."

"How does that feeling compare to what you have been

experiencing during the past years?"

"Spot on, as they say. As perfect a match as you can imagine. But it was intense and full blown from the outset. That was a really good question you asked – about the comparison. I'd even say the feeling was more like what I felt before breakfast today than what I'm used to feeling. Absolutely terrifying, like, unfortunately, I'm feeling right now. Head between my legs time, I'm thinking."

Milton was out his door and into the back seat immediately. It was a short limo, which meant there was six feet between the front of the rear seat and the back of the front seat. He helped Ricky undo his pants belt. Ricky had already removed the seat belt. Together they bent him down. Milton rubbed his back and massaged his shoulders. They continued in that way for several minutes before Ricky sat up and leaned back in the seat offering one last humongous sigh. He was probably too soon ready to get out and back into his wheelchair. For a moment, in his exhaustion, he had considered asking Milton to carry him from the car seat to the wheelchair, but realized that would just be a first sign that he was giving up, and Ricky Wilford did not give up.

"Milton, have you ever felt like you needed to attack the world with a barrage of the worst possible swear words at the top of your lungs, but you couldn't think of any that were bad enough to meet your needs?"

"Quite honestly, I have to say, no, I haven't, but I can at least imagine what a disturbing state it must take to necessitate that sort of behavior."

Ricky nodded without another word on the matter and they moved on into the house.

Milton had planned to share with Ricky the fact that they had been followed to and from their outing by an old white van. Considering the most recent events he decided that could wait.

Ricky went up to his room by elevator. Milton returned to his room on the second by way of the wide, winding staircase. He had some pineapple upside down cake to work off. He left his door open.

It happened almost exactly when, and at the pitch, he expected. The old gentleman had to admit that although he

could all quite plainly hear every last syllable in the string of words streaming down the staircase, there were several he had never come across before. It stopped. He closed his door. Sunday was Milton's day off, but there would be no Bocce ball that morning. He would stick close awaiting Ricky's next need.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

The past three hours have pretty well summarized my life during these past few years. Terror, followed by the love and support of my family, followed by deep disappointment, followed by more terror, followed by more love and acceptance. I suppose except for the terror, all of that is fairly typical for a boy my age. We all seem to have lots of little disappointments along the way. I hope most of the other kids are also surrounded by the love and understanding that helps make it possible to handle all the bad stuff. That sounded like I was sane, right? Maybe it just sounded trite or stilted.

I did gain one insight this morning – crucial, I believe. I got the flash of an intense memory – an image tied to emotion. Doc says those are the most powerful kinds of memories there are – image plus emotion. It was terror combined with a face. The terror I recognized immediately. It's been one of the constants in my life since I can remember about things. The face, however, was indistinguishable – unidentifiable – vague and yet familiar. I suppose that could be because originally, I didn't really get a good look at it or for some reason my mind is blocking it out whenever it comes into view. Doc would vote for the second, of course. As much as I hate to admit it, I tend to agree with him.

It makes we wonder if my ongoing experiences of terror started at that moment back during the horror of the accident or if it was something about that face that struck this unending terror into my little being. I think that is one of those important questions that will eventually lead me to the bottom of all this.

I was hoping to receive a memory of my mother's face. I didn't. I believe that the image my mind carries of her is not really based on experience with her, but some sort of composite from pictures and descriptions that have come my way over the past twelve years. That could be sad, I guess,

but at least I have something to hold onto – to refer to. The one picture if small and blurred.

It's like dad. Just about my first memory about anything is looking at his picture in his army uniform. I think I even remember saluting back at it – he was saluting in the picture. It sat on a table somewhere – back in my home with mom I assume. It was good that she had the picture there for me even though I never got to see him. I think that says a lot about her character and her love for me – maybe her love for my dad, too. It helps me better understand the concept of being able to love somebody, but not being able to live with them.

I can't remember the face at the back window this morning – I mean I can remember A face, just no useful details that let me remember THE face. I imagine that whoever it belonged to was as surprised as I was. A possibility came to me just now. Could it have been that against the dark world beyond the window, I saw my own reflection and my mind reconfigured it for some reason into . . . what. . . a bad guy, a malevolent image? It seems reasonable since my mind is so hell bent on making every little thing into something that terrifies me. It sure did seem real, though.

It reminded me that over the months and years my thinking on things has had to change. Early on I wondered if dad was still keeping track of me – from a distance. Now, with him hundreds of miles away, that can't be, of course. So, it couldn't have been his face. When I heard about Uncle Carl's attempt to extort money from Father before my adoption, I wondered if he might have come back and was trying to harm me or take me in order to get back at father or to again make a play for money. He's dead so that leaves him out of the equation, also. It was the one thing that would have explained Limp Man's attempt to get me into his van – Limp Man would have been my uncle. Now, that whole scene is just unexplainable confusion. It just hangs there, draped like a tattered black curtain toward the front of my mind preventing me from seeing things clearly.

I obviously have reason to be afraid of him – Limp Man – but I have no clue about why. What's his motivation? He followed us in his van this morning, but I didn't tell Milton for

fear it would only add to his concerns about me and my safety. It seems reasonable that I should no longer be out and about alone until – if – this whole thing gets settled.

I will have to tell father about it all when he gets home. I have no idea how much Milton has already fed to him. Poor Milton. He is certainly caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. Father will want to involve the police – maybe hire a body guard. I guess that's probably the sensible way to go although I don't know how it will really help. I'm not going to put up with a cop following me around everywhere I go. As much as I love Milton, I couldn't tolerate him either.

Father will also insist that I go back and see Dr. Wilson. That might be okay. I'd be willing to talk about that quick image of a face and feeling of terror that recently came to me.

I've been wondering why all the colorful Christmas decorations don't send me directly to the loony bin. During that season, they are always EVERYWHERE! It came to me that blue is never a prominent color at Christmas – red, white, green and orange seem to dominate the color scheme. That suggests that whatever the trigger is, it has to boldly include blue. I suppose all the other, brighter colors, could overpower what blue sneaks in at Christmas. The bizarre thing about that realization will be if now, that I've included blue in my inner concept of Christmas decorations, they DO begin sending me into panic attacks. At one level that's quite humorous. At another is most certainly isn't.

The theme for the TWIRP dance was Halloween, so there were no red, white and blue anything's there – browns, oranges, greens, and yellows with a bit of white snow simulated here and there. I suppose I just lucked out without engaging my common sense that time.

I guess I need to get the rest of my homework out of the way. I should do that this morning.

Oh. A piece of stupendously good news. When I measured my upper legs last night they were exactly fourteen inches – both of them. That seems like the best news I've had in years – well, being asked to the dance was pretty great too. Perhaps I need to begin separating great events in my life into two categories: 1) run of the mill, every day events, and 2) events, the reaction to which is most likely driven by my teen-

boy hormones. (glad I don't have to diagram that sentence!)

I must admit, that as I sat there looking at my legs last evening, I had a few really sad minutes, realizing that one day soon they would be gone. They've been a part of me all my life and were my dependable means of exploring my world when I was young. It brought some tears, I will admit.

Oh (# 2!) When I got home this morning I discovered a new feeling related to all this. Before, it had been terror and panic. This morning I sense a good deal of anger just under the surface, meaning close to the surface, pounding at the surface, wanting to break through the surface. I haven't yet determined its cause, but I suppose it makes sense. Susan said one of the things she likes about me is that I never get angry about little things the way other guys do. I suspect this new anger I'm feeling isn't going to be about little things. It's likely about the seemingly unresolvable, uncontrollable terror/panic situation I find myself in. I'm tired of it. I want out. I want it to go away. I really don't know how I'm going to keep going. All I could muster a few minutes ago, was to scream a long list of expletives that embarrassed even me as I was delivering them. I'm glad nobody else could hear them. It could be, I suppose, that I am angry at myself for not being able to solve this thing. Maybe angry at my legs for having become unserviceable. Maybe at father for not fixing things for me. Maybe at mom for dying and letting all this happen to me. Maybe at the damned hit and run driver who just left us there on the street with no concern for our welfare. Maybe at the Universe for turning on me. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Interesting, the one person I know I have been angry at all these years is Doctor Wilson and he is the one supposedly charged with the task of helping me get all of this resolved. Could it be I don't want to get it resolved? Could it be I'm afraid to find the answer? Could it be there is some terrible thing about me that my mind is working to keep me from finding – realizing? (Scream!)

I haven't taken a nap since I was five, but I'm about to – a lights off, face down, head covered by a pillow, nap. I expect lots of tears and lots of pain and lots of grappling with my sudden feelings of being totally lost in a life I barely recognize. I hope I won't need the pills this morning.

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Chapter Nine: A FAKE, A SET UP, A RUSE!

The knock on the door was repetitive and grew louder. Ricky roused from a very deep sleep that had been laden with frightening faces and crackling lightning and large limber trees in the darkness that bent over trying to pick him up and carry him away. Wakefulness was a relief.

“Open,” he managed through the frog in his throat as he rolled onto his back.

Milton entered looking concerned.

“Are you ill?” he said moving close to the bed.

“Depends. Physically I’m doing okay. Mentally is still up for grabs.”

“I won’t pretend to understand that, but I assume you will clarify it if you think it’s worth doing. You are in bed during the daylight hours, you know.”

Ricky managed a smile.

“Took a nap. Bad dreams. Now awake. Good to see your reassuring face. Starved.”

“I wouldn’t doubt that; it’s after one. I know that you and your father handle Sunday noon by yourselves, but I became concerned when I didn’t hear you rummaging around down stairs.”

“Thanks for your concern. I am alive and kicking. I believe it is now time for that rummaging to begin. Have you eaten? You’re supposed to be off today.”

“You are welcome for my concern. I am happy you are alive and kicking and also that you are ready to rummage. I have not eaten and I have decided to remain here today.”

“Then let’s do some major rummaging together.”

“Abby said there was sandwich fixings the refrigerator.

Other things I imagine as well. She went to her sisters this afternoon."

They rode the elevator to the first floor and soon managed sandwiches, chips, fruit and drinks. The conversation steered away from the most obviously pressing topics.

"I have homework to finish up so I guess I'll get that out of the way. You should go do whatever you do on your days off. We'll lock the doors and I'll be fine."

"There is something we *could* attend to after you get your school work done."

"Oh! A double date. I'm up for that."

As happened often between them, the foolishness was merely noted and they moved on.

"I guess I mentioned to Jake's grandfather that we had scraped up some sample pieces of evidence. He said if we would get them to him he was sure the police lab would run some preliminary examination of them."

"That's great. I had forgotten I still had them. They are right here on my rig."

He removed the large envelope and put it is his lap.

"So, when?"

"After you get your work done, I suppose."

"None of it is actually due until Wednesday. I just like to get a head start on things, you know."

"What are you saying; that we should go now?"

"I suppose I am."

"Let me give him a call and see if this is a good time. It's about two, isn't it?"

It had been more a question to himself than to Ricky so the boy let it pass.

It was arranged. They cleaned up the kitchen table in no time thanks to the universal bachelor approach to meal preparation – throwaway spoons, fruit right out of the jars, and paper towels for plates and napkins. The table was back to being Abby presentable in fifteen seconds – twenty tops.

Jackets on and Betsy stowed, they were on their way.

"Jake will probably be surprised when I show up. We've never talked about where he lives or visits or things like that."

"His grandfather says you are all he talks about. It sounds like you have changed the lad's life around."

"Then I suspect he was ready to change his life because I really haven't done all that much."

"Isn't it interesting – the catalyst concept."

"Catalyst concept?" Ricky asked.

"Catalyst – a substance that, when added to a combination of others, changes those others in substantial ways but itself remains unchanged."

"If you're speaking of me as the catalyst, I can tell you Jake's changed me, too. I found I liked helping him and that Susan liked it that I had helped him. She says I am his role model. I hated that at the beginning, but now I'm sort of into it, I guess. It's like the first person that's ever looked up to me."

"I will bow to your analysis and withdraw your name from contention as Catalyst of the Year. Just let me add you are way off base that lots of people don't look up to you."

The two of them had always enjoyed that kind of verbal jousting. Abby put up with it with smiles, but it was never undertaken in his father's presence. Jonathon understood about humor, but really didn't enjoy getting entangled in it.

Jake was out at the curb at the end of the sidewalk waiting as they pulled up. Even before Ricky had the passenger side door fully open he was being treated to the new tricks Jake had learned.

Ricky clapped and nodded as he scooted to the edge of the front seat, assuming they would not be staying long enough to need to have Betsy spread her wings.

"Man, you have been working hard. Look great! I hope you remembered to do your school work."

"Like you said, work first, then play."

Ricky couldn't remember having said that, but it was what Milton had always insisted on, so the two of them exchanged a knowing glance, both happy to share the credit.

Ricky delivered the envelope to Milton who was soon standing on the sidewalk. His friend hurried down the walk from the front steps to meet him. It was one of those greetings Ricky loved to witness: a long-held handshake accompanied by each other hands on the others' shoulders. There was something about that, which demonstrated a very

special – genuine or heartfelt – relationship he thought. He hoped that someday he would have a friend he would feel was worthy of such a greeting.

The envelope was exchanged, opened, and the contents discussed. Jake's grandfather would take it personally to the lab still that afternoon. One of his semi-retired friends still ran the lab on weekends. He felt sure he could get a rush on it.

"I thought you were out of town," Ricky said to Jake.

"Give me five minutes after you leave and I will be. I sort of threw a fit to get to stay long enough to see you."

"Fits only prove one thing and it's not something you want to be known by," Ricky said, not elaborating.

Jake shrugged and took a serious expression.

"Glad I got you see you," Ricky continued. "We'll be on our way now so you won't be delayed any further."

Jake's face looked puzzled. Most people in his life would have continued the lecture until the moon came up. Ricky closed the door. Milton took his seat behind the wheel and they were back on the road.

As one, they started to say something:

""There's something I need to . . .""

They smiled and chuckled.

"You first, Ricky said. The age before beauty thing."

"Alright. On our sojourn this morning the white van was following us."

"I know. I saw it. That's what I was just starting to say to you. I haven't seen it this afternoon, have you?"

"No. Although I suppose that doesn't mean whoever it is couldn't have more than one vehicle."

"You take the discovery of a nice simple tailing operation and immediately complicate it."

Ricky had intended it as a joke, but it contained a good deal of truth.

"I feel like exercising down in the gym," Ricky said. "I've been skipping that the last few nights. Feel free to join me."

"That sounds like a fine idea. I, too, have been less than diligent in that regard."

"I love it when you speak your butler talk."

"My butler talk?"

"Yeah. Like just then; 'I, too, have been less than diligent in that regard.' Usually when it's just you and me or you and me and Abby, you talk real-person talk."

"Hmm. I suppose that could be. You are the one responsible for the degradation of my English you know."

"I wonder if the phrase, 'degradation of my English' has ever been said before in the whole history of the language."

It was worth an uncharacteristic shrug from Milton's narrow shoulders.

"Anyway, how did I degrade things," Ricky asked.

"When you first arrived at your father's house and I would speak to you, your face would pucker up and you'd begin crying. It didn't happen with Abby or your father. That first evening it became my privilege to read a story book to you. I approached the undertaking with no little trepidation. It came to me that while I was reading you were fine – even though it was a brand-new book to you. You listened attentively; you smiled; and you giggled appropriately.

"It was actually Abby who made the connection. My, butler talk, as you have christened it, was evidently so very different from what you were used to at home and in your neighborhood, that it came across as some sort of indistinguishable foreign language or gibberish, perhaps. When I gave it up for a more common version, the puckering stopped, the tears stopped and you began seeking a spot on my lap, dragging a book in your wake, many times each day."

"So, you're saying there was a time I *wouldn't* have been telling you I loved it when you spoke butler talk."

"Without the wonderful elaboration, I just provided around that theme, yes, I believe you have astutely culled out the gist of it."

"Which one is your first language?"

"It would have been butlereeze, I imagine. My parents were both professors – father English and mother drama. Speaking the common tongue – as my father called it – was akin to swearing in my home."

Ricky nodded. His question had been answered. How a man from that background had become a butler would be a question for another day.

"Speaking of swearing," Milton said just letting it drop.

"Oh. You heard. I suppose so."

Ricky offered an impish grin.

"I didn't hold anything back. It felt so good and it felt so wrong."

"Someday you will have to explain to me what several of those words mean – if you feel up to it."

"Seems only fair. You explained most of the others to me when I was nine."

They shared another smile and the topic was closed for then, at least.

As they pulled into the garage Ricky's phone rang. It was his father. He sat in the car alone and talked for some time. It was a good conversation and he was happy to hear from him. The sole down note was that he had to stay away one more day. Ricky really didn't understand why, but accepted it in good humor. It would just be one more day. His father seldom left overnights so he really had nothing to complain about on that front.

Milton had Betsy waiting beside the car door and Ricky was soon back inside the house. A few minutes later Milton found him rolling his chair back and forth across the living room floor.

"What on earth are you doing, son?"

"I'm pacing – waiting for those lab results is as bad as waiting for a baby to arrive."

Milton's first inclination was to argue the position showing how there was really no similarity whatsoever, but thought better of it.

"Let's get on down to the gym and you can continue your pacing on the chin up bar."

"Sounds good."

The elevator ride took fifteen seconds, which was long enough for Ricky to bring up another important topic.

"I measured my legs and they are a solid fourteen inches. I'm really excited. I can't wait to tell father. I thought about doing it on the phone just now, but I want to get a really good close up look at his face when I tell him."

"That is a remarkable milestone in your life, isn't it?"

"I've been waiting for it for as long as I can remember,

literally. I hope he doesn't decide I should wait 'til summer. I'm afraid that's what he'll say."

"So, you just need to prepare a logically laid out list of reasons it should take place immediately and offer that before he has an opportunity to suggest the summer."

"I had already begun thinking along that line. Doing school work ahead and things like that."

"And I am sure you had."

They entered the gym – weights, bars and machines in one area and a combination sauna and swim-in-place pool in another. Ricky stripped down and got right to work. He enjoyed exercising so once he got started it generally went well.

For dinner they ordered in pizza – extra, extra, large. It was something Ricky and his father often did. It provided left overs for Ricky to munch on for several days – well, several hours at least. The two of them settled in at the kitchen table and chatted about nothing and everything.

While they were eating, Milton received a call saying that one of his Bocce ball friends had suffered a heart attack and was asking for him at Methodist Hospital – clear across town.

"He needs you. You must go. We'll lock up his place and I'll be fine, you know that. Just give me a ring right before you try to enter the house when you return so I don't bludgeon you with an iron pipe."

Milton wavered for several minutes. He called his retired policeman friend thinking he might be able to come and stay with Ricky, but he did not answer. It was his poker night and he often turned off his phone during those high stakes games – a fifty-cent buy-in plus a six pack of some beverage for the evening. Milton had participated once, but the cigar smoke made him sick and he had never returned (which was fine with the others since he had cleaned them out).

In the end, he decided to go. It was only a thirty-minute drive one way. If he stayed just a half hour he would be back at the house in less than two hours. It was 7:15. He'd be back near nine – not really late.

There were four outside doors – one from the garage into the back hall, the kitchen door, the one from the den and

the front door. They made the rounds checking them together. At about the time Ricky had been moved into the house, all the windows had been replaced with energy efficient models and none of them opened. Those in the basement and on the first floor were wired as a part of the security system – any broken pane sounded an alarm and summoned the police. Ricky actually felt quite safe.

Milton left, enumerating far more instructions than seemed necessary. Ricky understood his concern and heard him out patiently. When the garage door closed, Ricky slid the dead bolt locks into place on both sides. Milton had advised Abby to call ahead. She would not be home until after ten. Ricky left lights on in the first floor – the kitchen, hall and living room. He settled into his room and began his homework. He had ‘high class’ study music playing in the background and his ball bat in his lap. Both culture and safety seemed to have been provided for.

At eight thirty he got the munchies so went down to the refrigerator and warmed several slices of pizza in the microwave. He got a soda and was soon on his way back upstairs in the elevator. It stopped at the second floor.

“I must have pushed the wrong button with all this stuff in my lap.”

By then, the doors had opened, of course, causing a slight delay. It is a part of the genetic makeup of fifteen-year-old boys to despise ‘slight delays’, so he mounted a sigh in disgust waiting for those seemingly never-ending six seconds to pass. As he reached out to reset the button for three, the lights in the elevator went out. It had happened before during or after thunderstorms. There was a backup generator for the elevator which was activated by opening a lid on the control panel and pulling the red lever. He managed that in the dark. Nothing happened. He pulled it a second time. He fared no better.

He moved forward just enough so he could look up and down the hallway. The hall lights should have been on, but weren’t. They were on a different circuit from the elevator. He moved out and, feeling his way along the hall wall, he made his way to the stairway. He looked down to the first floor. It was dark. He looked up to the third floor. There were no

lights up there either.

"Maybe a general neighborhood outage," he said, thinking out loud. He continued down the hall to the outside window. He scanned the area outside. All the houses were lit and the street lights were on.

"Up, down or here?" he asked himself.

He opted for down since it was easier for him to go down than up. He thought he had more defensive options on the first floor if they would be needed. For one thing, he could go outside and call for help. Blowing his whistle inside there on the second floor would be useless.

He left his wheelchair and his phony legs behind and, carrying his bat across his lap, he began the trip, butt bumping his way down to the first floor. It wasn't until his was half way down that it really hit him. He could be in a very dangerous situation – at home alone, the electricity off for no apparent reason, and a stalker – his stalker – loose in the city – perhaps right in there with him. Still, how could anybody gain access to the house? He felt some relief with that realization.

"The basement windows," he said out loud. "They could be broken and I'd never hear it. And, we didn't lock the door in the hall at the top of the basement stairs."

The circuit breakers were also down there. He hurried on down the stairs and across the hall floor to the basement door. He turned the lock.

"Of course, I don't know if somebody might have *already* come upstairs, do I?"

Then, silently, he told himself he probably needed to be quiet in case anybody else was there with him. He figured if somebody had broken in and if that somebody was after him, he would know that he was there alone or he wouldn't have come inside, and he would probably know his room was up on the third floor.

Should he hide, should he run, or should he confront the intruder? First, it would help to know where that person was in the house. He had not encountered anybody on the steps between the second and first floors. He had not encountered him in the hall. All signs pointed to the fact he was probably still in the basement.

That supposition, though correct, would not remain

correct for long. Ricky could see a moving light – a flashlight, he figured – through the crack under the basement door. The knob turned back and forth, although the door could not open. It was definitely time to hide.

He wanted to catch the person in the act of doing whatever he had come to do. He headed for the living room. It contained large pieces of furniture to hide behind and had easy access to the front door. Once in there, he saw the problem. The large windows on the front and side let in a good deal of outside light. Hiding in there really wasn't an option. He moved back into the hall to a spot from which he could enter the living room or the den. The den would be dark. It had only one, small window on the back-wall bedside the door. There was no light in the back yard – the moon, but it was still only a new moon. He opted for the den and none too soon.

Whoever was on the upper landing of the basement steps was forcing his body against the door – repeatedly. That little deadbolt would probably give way. It would take a sizeable body to break it down, but that's just what was happening.

In the den, there was really only one hiding place – beneath his father's large desk. Ricky could fit under it with no trouble. First, he closed the door behind him and locked it – also a deadbolt, which clearly hadn't performed as advertised up to that point. He backed in under the desk.

It hit him. He should have left the house through the den door – to heck with catching the person in the act. He bent forward preparing to move toward the door just as the one behind him came crashing in. The beam of a flashlight darted around the room. Presently, that light came to rest at the crack under the front of the desk. Ricky understood that the desk had suddenly become the intruder's focus. He clutched his bat and made ready to do battle. It was one of those, 'pray if you got em' moments.

The things that followed were confusing.

There was a voice – deep and commanding – unfamiliar.

"Hey, you. Stop where you are. Police!"

Police? He hadn't called the police.

Before he could wonder further, there were the sounds of a scuffle and more breaking wood – perhaps as the two rolling on the floor. There was a loud thump and a groan, which came from out in the hallway. Ricky heard somebody running across the wooden floor of the living room and out the front door.

He crawled out from under the desk and moved – with less caution than was reasonable – to the hall door. A body lay there. It was groaning. A flashlight lay on the floor beside him. Ricky picked it up and tried to make out who had been left behind. He continued to clutch his bat.

It was Jake's grandfather, bleeding from the head and looking altogether roughed up.

"You okay, sir? Can I help you sit up?"

"I wouldn't say I was okay, but yes, if you will, help sit me up against the wall."

"Why in the world are you here – and thank you for being here, by the way?"

"I was bringing by the lab reports. My phone stopped working so I didn't call ahead."

Ricky refrained from pointing out that he could have borrowed a phone, partly because it wasn't his place and partly because it had been so fortunate that he *had* just dropped in.

"What made you do everything you did after you got here?"

It was Ricky's ill phrased question, but apparently communicated the several things that were on his mind.

"The house was dark. The rest of the neighborhood was well lit. It was only 8:45. I became suspicious – especially in light of what Milton has shared with me about your recent problems with strangers. I walked around the house and spotted an open basement window. Somebody had arranged an ingenious short circuit of the security system and had been able to cut a small circle out of the glass and open the inside latch. I let myself in the same way the intruder had. I always carry a penlight – habit from my days on the force – and made my way up the stairs. I saw the disaster at the landing door and noticed the flickering light from a flashlight through this doorway. I don't carry a weapon anymore, of course, but over

the years I learned a good bluff was often every bit as good as a good 45. That's when I called out to him, which triggered his attack on me with his big flashlight. With me rendered useless on the floor here, he fled through the front door."

"Wow! And all this because hundreds of years ago, somebody invented Bocce ball."

The old man chuckled and struggled to his feet, actually being able to link together the string of esoteric comments to understand the comment – the game, the friendships, the rescue. He knew about Ricky's physical limitations and carried on as if they were of no concern.

"First, we need to place a call to the police," he said.

"I got 911 all ready to go here."

"That'll take too long. May I borrow your phone?"

He plunked in a few numbers and began talking. This is badge 3752, retired. Reporting a break-in at 1938 Plantation Drive. Intruder is probably now fleeing in an older model white van."

Ricky leaned in close to the phone and interrupted – "License number GH 46578. A stolen plate."

"You get that?" the old man said into the phone.

He then nodded, hung up, and handed the phone back to Ricky.

"Let's get the lights back on. Breakers in the basement, I imagine."

"Yes, sir. You sure you should be moving about?"

"Takes more than a conk on the head to keep an old cop down."

"Okay, then. Follow me."

They were soon at the black box on the wall of the utility room. A dozen clicks later and things were back in order – well, the lights, not one basement window, two interior doors, and one very brave retired policeman's forehead.

They went up to the living room to wait. Ricky used the elevator to rescue Betsy and had himself fitted up all quite presentably by the time the first squad car arrived.

A moment later Milton entered through the front door.

"What in the world?" he said looking around, not yet understanding what had taken place.

Ricky attempted an answer.

"Well, this is what happens when you trust a Bocce ball buddy to deliver a simple lab report. He climbs in a basement window, confronts an intruder who accosts him, saves a boy from who knows what sort of calamity, and continues to claim he has lab reports, although I have not actually seen them yet."

The old policeman chuckled. Milton continued to frown and went to Ricky and put his hand on his back.

"I shouldn't have left you alone. The phone call was a set up – a fake – a ruse. My friend was not at the hospital. Somebody knows a great about us and is fairly clever in how he is choosing to use it."

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Chapter Ten: FOURTEEN INCHES

The police finished and left. The window in the basement received a temporary fix. Ricky rescued the pizza from the stairway – except for a few pieces of easily removed carpet lint, it wasn't half bad.

When Abby returned, they filled her in on the exploits of the evening. Since it was clear none of them were going to be able to sleep, Abby made cinnamon rolls. Ricky tried his hand again at making coffee – two scoops. It wasn't half bad according to reports. Milton opened the envelope from the lab and they gathered around the kitchen table to see what had been found.

The thick liquid on the street was, indeed, motor oil. They further discover it was filthy and a mixture of many brands and weights, suggesting it had not been completely changed in, perhaps, years. They also believed that due to all those unique characteristics, they could match it with a vehicle's oil if the vehicle in question could be located.

The sample of black, gum-like material, which Ricky had pegged as blood was, in fact, blood. There was enough to type and even render a DNA test if required. It was AB positive – the universal donor variety. Hardly a case breaking finding.

There was a note from Milton's friend saying he had ordered the DNA evaluation, with the understanding Jonathan would stand the cost. That of course would be no problem.

Ricky suggested they search the splinters from the broken doors for signs of blood or skin, which might be used

to connect the recent intruder with the van operator the night of the attempted abduction. If it were there that night, it would still be there the following day. They opted for bed.

They each managed a few hours of sleep. Monday morning, Ricky arrived at school just as the final bell sounded. He dragged through the day.

By the time school was out that afternoon he was exhausted. He met Susan at the usual spot. She asked about Jake's absence and he explained. That actually gave them more time together and that was nice. She sat on a low wall and he moved in close to her. She offered her hand and he held it. It was soft but not weak – the perfect hand for a girlfriend he thought.

They talked about mostly unmemorable things. It was just being together that seemed important.

"You seem tired," she said.

"Yeah. I didn't sleep really well last night. We had a visitor and I got to bed late."

He smiled, thinking he had handled that quite well.

"What? What are you smiling about?"

"Oh, a month ago, I never dreamed I'd be sitting here with Susan after school holding her hand and enjoying a conversation about nothing in particular."

"So, that's what you think of my conversational skills?" she said not immediately letting on it had been a joke.

Ricky was happy to see the eventual smile break across her face. At first, he figured he had done something – crossed some line that girl's never mention until it has been crossed.

He was coming to understand that many girls seemed to have lots rules boys were just supposed to know – without them ever being stated. He thought it was a most inefficient manner in which to form comfortable relationships. Susan didn't seem to play that card and he was appreciative.

Her mother arrived. He continued to hold Susan's hand as they moved together to the car. Just before she slid in beside her mother she gave him a quick kiss on his temple. Fully unexpected he didn't know how to react.

Milton had given him several unsolicited pieces of boy/girl advice. One of the best was, "When you don't know

what to say, don't say anything – just mount a slight smile and nod." So far it had always worked.

He bent down and looked through the window after her, offering a slight smile and nod. Clearly it had, once again, been the correct response. 'Good going, Milton!'

Speaking of – Milton pulled in after the long white limo had left. He had been waiting just down the street. Ricky appreciated that he had a fine sense of how it was to be a teenager. Perhaps that was because not only had he once been a teenager, but he was among the fortunate few grown-ups who hadn't forgotten how it was to be one. (He also appreciated the unsolicited ride.)

"Your father called saying he will be home in time for dinner this evening. He seems eager to return. He has never been much for being away from his family."

Ricky smiled, knowing that 'family' mostly meant *him*. He didn't spend as much time thinking about it as he had during his pre-teen years, but he was thankful to be where he was and to have his three main special people in his life – well, four since Susan – four and a half if you counted her mother.

He had lots of things to tell his father and figured they needed to be presented in some sort of logical order.

At dinner, he managed a very well organized presentation. His father listened with clear interest to every sentence. He asked questions where questions were needed and offered comments here and there. It was the way their conversations usually went – lively, interesting and always friendly.

Ricky had saved the best news for last.

"I have the best news you could possibly ever imagine."

Even though there could only be ONE topic that important in their lives, his father went ahead and asked, so his son could be the bearer of the news.

"I can hardly wait. Give!" his father said.

"Does the number fourteen mean anything to you?"

"Well, let's see, a baker's dozen plus one?"

Ricky understood the game was on.

"Wrong!"

"The age you were before your last birthday?"

"Wrong!"

"Five times ten minus six times six."

"Quick thinking for an old . . . er brain, but still wrong."

By then Ricky understood that his father knew, but he went ahead with the announcement any way.

"They both measure fourteen inches and you know what that means."

"Well, I'm just guessing here, but I imagine we need to schedule surgery immediately."

"Immediately? I must say I'm a little disappointed in you, father."

Obviously confused, his father asked, "What?"

"I figured you'd say put it off until summer and then I'd trot out my carefully organized list of ten reasons why now would be better than later."

"Do you want to have to go through all of that?"

"Well, no."

"Okay, then. After dessert, we'll give Doctor Hess a call."

"At this time of night?"

"The way I figure it this operation will pay his youngest daughter's way through college. I have no qualms about disrupting his evening. He'll really be pleased for you, you know."

Ricky nodded as he smiled across the table. Dr. Hess had examined him regularly during the past six years, supervising the physical therapy and offering ever-encouraging words to a most impatient young patient.

Ricky had committed the schedule to memory. It became the jumping off point for a lengthy monolog.

"One day prep time in the hospital. Then the surgery and five days of recovery at the hospital. He'll undoubtedly throw in a psychiatric visit to help me though my non-existent trauma over my loss. We'll just humor him about that. Then some time – I'm thinking three days – at home with trial leg sleeves to prepare my stumps. Two weeks later I get my artificial limbs and by Christmas I'll be dancing a jig with Mrs. Santa Clause at the party for the kids at the Boys and Girls Club.

"We'll have to arrange any rules you think are

necessary for Susan's visits. I'm sure she will come every day. Jake will probably want to come, too. I hope he's okay with my new legs – not jealous or anything. I don't know why he's confined to a chair. I will need to talk with him ahead of time."

It suddenly seemed like one of those best days of his life. Ricky often forgot how lucky he was to have had so many of those. He had stopped feeling guilty about all the children that were left behind at the orphanage, but was still concerned. He had even written about it in his newspaper column and it had been picked up and run in the local city paper assuring a fine Christmas for the few remaining residents.

Dinner lasted a record breaking 64 minutes. (Ricky kept track of such things.) It was one of the best Ricky could remember. Abby had a way of producing extra special desserts for such extra special occasions. That evening it had been double crust, strawberry-rhubarb pie – a favorite of all three of the men in that house.

His father had business to attend to in his den. Ricky still had the due-Wednesday homework to finish. Before he went up to his room for the night he stuck his head in the kitchen where Abby and Milton were finishing the dishes. His message was short and to the point.

"Number two at Eight thirty."

The two of them understood. A second piece of pie with milk in his room at 8:30. It was implied that Milton would bring a piece for himself and be armed with appropriate utensils.

Abby was always on a diet so she didn't partake in such occasions, *meaning* she would also have the pie, but would eat it out of sight of the others. There really were very few secrets in that house.

Milton received a call from Brad, his retired policeman friend. The van had not been found. Milton reminded him that it might not have been the vehicle involved with the house break in so it may have been a wild goose chase from the beginning.

The late evening pie was excellent! He was still working on the crumbs when Milton left a half glass of milk still

lingering there on the desk beside him.

Ricky was tired from the night before and intended an early bed time.

At exactly 9:00 an email arrived. Subject: Household safety.

It could be an ad for security systems prompted by information about the break-in. That, he would not open. The *From* line made it irresistible, however: *GH46578* It was the license plate on the van. More and more it appeared somebody had a regular feed of inside information. He opened it.

*A and M and J,
Will never be able to play,
Laid out on three slabs,
From gun wounds and stabs,
If you don't come still today.*

"Almost a limerick," Ricky thought, as bad feelings began to percolate inside his chest. The initials, of course, referred to Abby, Milton and Jonathon. The rest had hardly been hidden.

Directions followed: *Roof of 3241, 11:00, I have the answers you have been looking for. Delete this message NOW. Come alone. Do not leave a note behind. I will know.*

It was not signed.

Ricky knew his way around computers and all things web-related. He quickly copied the email and printed it to his word processer putting it in a file on his desk top labeled TROUBLE. He placed it in the center of the screen which put a good margin on all sides. He then deleted the Email as directed.

He would go of course, just like the sender apparently knew he would. The message had included everything necessary to ensure *that* – the threat of harm to his loved ones and the promise of answers. The 'From line' had cinched the legitimacy of the sender.

He took a moment to scan the room wondering if a hidden camera had somehow been secreted there in there. That part about knowing things might just be a bluff of course, but he would not take that chance when his people were involved. He had, however, reduced the brightness on his

computer screen considerably while he copied and transferred the Email hoping that would make it impossible for a camera to pick it up, had there been a camera. The possibility of such surveillance was also the reason he didn't leave a note. The time he had spent manipulating the Email had been stretching things.

But, the sender was not the only creative person who was party to the current 'situation'.

Ricky withdrew three, well used, books from his shelves and arranged them from left to right as the only things on his table. The two to the left he opened and laid flat. The third he stood up, forming a triangle with the desk top. It was at the right end.

By nine o'clock on Sunday evening everybody would have retreated to their own rooms. Well, sometimes in his happy fantasies he had Milton and Abby retreating to the same room, but that was not relevant. The main part of the house would be empty.

He folded a medium heavy jacket and laid it on his lap. He secured a bat in the new holster on Betsy, and made sure he had extra flashlight batteries, water and a blanket in the compartment on the rear of his rig

He had to chance using the elevator. If somebody came out and inquired, he would be after a snack. And the jacket – he was bringing it down to be laundered.

He exited the elevator at the first-floor hall and waited there while its doors closed and it went to sleep until called upon again. It had not seemed to raise anybody's suspicions. He rolled on toward the front door. He punched in the security code, moved out onto the front porch and punched in the code again. It appeared things were going according to plan. The advantage to being trusted was clear. The disadvantage was the guilt he felt when he broke that trust. He would deal with that later.

The numbers in the email had been the address of his father's law office – 3241. He knew that building well. It housed several 24-hour offices, so the front doors were always open. If they weren't, he knew the security code. (No secrets at his house, remember?)

He took time to slip into his jacket and gloves before

wheeling himself north the two blocks to the intersection with a well-traveled boulevard. He put in a call for a cab to meet him there.

He and the cab arrived at almost the same moment. The driver was helpful and handled the chair while Ricky entered the cab. He didn't ask what a boy his age was doing out at that time of night. If he had, Ricky had prepared a harmless fib: he was on his way home from church where he had played the organ for choir practice. And he could have played, too, provided the opening hymn was chop-sticks.

He asked to be dropped off in front of a restaurant a half block from the office building. Again, if there had been a question that was where his mother worked as a waitress. He always walked her home at night. He saw the falsehoods less as falsehoods and more as practical practice for when he became a writer of stories, which he would pull from the lives of everyday folks, who, alone and sad, walked the grimy streets of the decrepit old city. (Not a bad start, actually!)

He waited for the cab to get lost in traffic a block on to the north before he began the trek up the street to 3241. Before entering he looked up wondering if the person he was to meet was already on the roof. He was some early.

Would it be Limp Man? Would it be Crutch man? Would it be somebody else? Somebody who had a reliable way of keeping track of things inside his house. That might be Milton's ex-police friend. Probably not considering the scene the night before. Who else might qualify? The exterminator came on the second Tuesday of every month. He barely spoke English so it probably wasn't him. It wouldn't be father. It clearly wasn't him – Ricky. Eliminating the nun on general principles, that really left just two others – Limpy and Crutchy. He had a sample of Cruch Man's voice but not of Limp Man's. He supposed he didn't need to recognize it anyway. It would be who it would be regardless. He felt for the bat, it was loose and easily available. He tightened his pants belt, but loosened his seat belt. If he were going to need to make a quick escape from his chair that was how things had to be.

"Like Milton once said, body armor would have been a nice addition to my supplies."

There was a night duty guard just inside the front door.

He was less there to control coming and going than to lend an image of law and order and keep an eye on a bank of camera monitors looking for emergencies. He and Ricky went way back.

"Hey, Hank. When my father gets here tell I'm already upstairs."

Hank nodded and waved him on his way. It had been a spur of the moment ploy to make his late-night appearance seem legitimate to the old gentleman in the blue uniform.

He went directly to one of several elevators and pressed ten – his father's floor. He rode it all the way to ten in case Hank was watching. He exited and moved down the hall to the service elevator. You needed either a swipe card or knowledge of the password, which you could enter on the key pad. Ricky entered the numbers. Inside he pressed 'R' for roof.

He had never been up there. His father had warned him against it. One little fall from fifteen stories just might be one's final fall.

On the service elevator, you had to press an extra button to operate the wide doors from the inside. He pressed the 'Hold' button and paused waiting a few moments before exiting. As he pushed the button he noticed the basement floor light came on, calling it down to the bottom of the shaft.

"Suppose that's my bad guy? Maybe some of the cleaning crew. I guess I have no way of knowing. Whoever it is will know it's coming down from the roof. That will either send somebody an important message or confuse the heck out of a mop wielding janitor."

He left the elevator. The doors closed behind him. Suddenly he felt very much alone. He understood there was a nine to one chance it was a set up with him the one to be set upon.

He looked around. Clouds had rolled in. It had been a strange autumn in that part of the country – unseasonably cool and thunder storms that lingered on from summer. He figured it was the effects of *el nina*, or *el nino* or global warming or who knew why. Maybe it was just an odd fall. None of that really mattered except that the clouds had begun boiling above him and he could see lightning brightening their cores

just to the north of town. The absolute darkness at that height came in stark contrast to the brightness of the world down at street level.

He was glad for the jacket. The wind was picking up and the air seemed colder. Scraps of paper flew and twirled over the flat, tar and gravel roof and fully fearlessly sailed out beyond the building as if enjoying a playful game of chase. Moving beyond the boundary of the building was not in Ricky's plan.

"Where shall I station myself? Should I call out?"

He decided to move to the center of the large area. There was a shack which housed the entrance to the stairway. He tried the door. It was locked from the inside. There were several vents – a dozen open pipes of various sizes and a brick structure some six feet tall and two feet in diameter. From where he sat it appeared to be a chimney open in top and hollow inside.

Here and there he saw metal barrels. He approached one to determine if it were empty or filled. That one was empty. Using his flashlight, he determined it was, or had been, tar. Apparently roof repair happened regularly up there.

He did a slow three sixty to get a better feel for the lay of the land – so to speak. He had to wait for the brightening of the clouds to make things visible. In general, it was an unremarkable area, basically free of objects that were not parts of the structure. The cement facing of the building rose three feet above the edge of the roof forming what could be characterized as a low wall or barricade, which proved some protection from falling off.

The service elevator entered from a ten by ten-foot structure at the center of the far south edge of the building probably seventy-five feet from where he sat in the center of the roof.

The lightning began showing itself all quite separately from the growing banks of dark clouds. It provided additional light as the jagged yellow forms appeared for a moment and then seemed to jump a half mile to the right or left or rear or front. It was one more unpredictable event that Ricky didn't need in his life at that moment.

He heard the elevator grind to a stop. The tiny light

came on above the doors. It seemed to take an eternity for them to open. Unless they were going to remain closed, it was just one more of those unnecessary delays that drove the young man wild.

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Chapter Eleven: **A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE CHIMNEY?**

Ricky opened the lid to his bat holster. Suddenly he wondered if he had made a wise choice – going it alone like that. Milton had warned him at thirteen that taking thoughtless risks were common to his age. He backed into the shadow of the chimney from where he could just make out the door to the elevator.

It opened. The light inside the car provided a silhouette of a man – a large man wearing a ball cap. It was the only real feature Ricky could make out.

The man stepped out onto the roof as a powerful clap of thunder shook the very roof they shared. By instinct, he pulled in his head like a turtle. The doors closed behind him. So much for using that as an escape route.

The man looked out over the black expanse and called out – “Boy. You here? I know you’s here, boy.”

He took several steps forward and repeated himself. He removed something from his front pants pocket. The next volley of lightning illuminated it – a switchblade. He flicked it open exposing an eight-inch blade which winked as it moved in the light.

“At least my bat is longer than his blade,” Ricky said under his breath. He removed the bat slowly and deliberately hoping to minimize any sound or sense of movement from there in the darkness.

“If he knows I’m here, he will soon realize there is only one place I could be – right where I am. Clearly, he didn’t come to share information the way his Email implied.”

Ricky wished he knew what the man *did* want.
He called out again.

"Boy! Show yourself. No harm will come to you. I promise. You're just going to stay with me for a while until Jonathon decides to pay me what I figure you're worth. Here's how it works. We ride this elevator to the basement, get into the van and drive to my place in the country. I got food. I got the soda I seen you like – the kind in the green can. You behave and no harm will come to you."

He went on as if Ricky didn't know the poor odds of a kidnap victim actually surviving. At least he knew what was in play – not that he could see how that improved his position one bit. The roof sloped very gradually to the west providing a water shed. The elevator was on the south side. Ricky was due north of the big man.

He had yet to produce a beam from a flashlight. Perhaps that was his precaution to shield himself from providing a good image for the security cameras. Ricky hoped there were security cameras up there. He hoped Hank had not dozed off. He hoped the lightning would provide enough light . . . He had lots of hopes. Hopes didn't produce action and what he needed at that moment was action.

He wasn't about to volunteer to go into combat against a knife and a man who more than likely knew how to use it. In all, the man had taken no more than six steps in his direction. He was still looking around as if mapping out his strategy. Ricky figured that was about to change.

In fact, several things changed at once. The wind grew stronger and began beating against the roof, driving the sudden downpour in swirls. That made it difficult to see as little as twenty feet in any direction. That could work in his favor although it meant he couldn't keep track of the man. Ricky was soaked to his skin in less than a minute. The water was flowing in rills west – down the slope – across the surface of the roof.

There came a prolonged series of lightning bursts that lit the area for some time as if a flare were dropping by parachute from the sky. He got his best look yet at the man. There was no doubt – it was Limp Man, ball cap, sports team jacket and all. In light of the outcome of the altercation at the

house, he figured the man would be willing to show very little patience toward him at that moment.

An idea had been formulating in the boy's mind. He needed to move immediately if it were to work. He rolled up next to the chimney and headed his chair down the slope to the west. He freed himself from the mannequin legs and the long trousers, removed his belt, and secured it tightly around his waist. Under the belt, he secured the nub of his bat. Leaning against the side of the chimney for support, he stood up on the arm of the chair. It provided just enough height so he could fold his fingers across the top of the chimney. If it were capped or weren't hollow his plan had failed before it started and his hopes were lost. It was his only plan, however.

'Now or never,' he thought.

He kicked the chair sending it on its way down the slope. The rushing water helped force it on its way. Limp Man apparently saw it.

"What you tryin' to pull, boy?" he called out angrily. "I see you there. Bendin' over in that chair ain't gonna save your hide."

The stakes had clearly just catapulted from enjoying a Mountain Dew® bash in the country to losing his hide.

Although Ricky couldn't see what was happening he assumed from the expletive laden monologue, which followed, that the man was moving after the chair. It was the distraction Ricky needed. It was the time for all those years of training to develop his muscular upper body to come through for him.

He pulled himself up chin high with the top of the chimney. "Yes! It's hollow!"

It hadn't been a thoughtfully quite response, but was insignificant against the noise from the raging storm that continued to grow in ferocity and volume. He was able to straighten his arms and raise his torso above the opening and slowly lower himself inside.

"I have to be careful now," he said, back to a quieter tone.

Catching the top edge of the chimney with the bottom of his ribcage, he balanced himself long enough to remove the bat from his belt and grip it with his teeth at about the center of its length. He then lowered himself on down inside the

opening. The ends of the bat came to rest on the top edges of the chimney – left and right. He shifted first one hand to take a grip on the bat and then the other. He was soon successfully hanging down inside the little brick structure from the bat, which was in place across the opening above.

He soon found that although he was mostly sheltered in there from the beating of the wind, the water poured in on top of him. He momentarily had great compassion for anyone who had ever been water boarded. He gasped and he swallowed and he coughed. Finally, he came to realize his best bet was to breathe through his nose as much as possible. The water ran past his nostrils and not into them as it did into his open mouth. It was still a struggle, but offered him more hope and less discomfort.

The wet bat became slippery and he had to continually reposition his grip so as to not lose it and fall.

He heard Limp Man raging outside, loud enough and angry enough to be heard above the storm. The voice came closer. As it did Ricky could again make out some of the words.

“Think you’re a smart one, do you, boy?”

Presently, something hit at one end of the bat. The man had seen it. Apparently, he wasn’t so dumb himself. The man pulled on it. It wouldn’t give under Ricky’s weight. Presently, the man began rolling the bat toward the front of the chimney. Ricky’s fingers would be smashed and the bat could then be easily pulled from his hands.

Should he try to pull himself back outside and surrender? It was a huge decision for a fifteen-year-old – a fifteen-year-old boy suddenly having terror driven doubts about becoming a sixteen-year-old boy.

Suddenly, the bat stopped moving. Ricky listened hoping to get some idea about what was going on outside. After several minutes, something banged against the outside of the chimney. Ricky figured he knew what it was – one of the empty barrels had been set in place. With Limp Man on top of it he’d be able to see into the hole and do whatever he pleased to him.

Ricky looked up, having to squint to fend off the rain. There was a light – likely a flashlight the way it darted quickly

from place to place.

A face appeared. Ricky was suddenly confused. He shook his head to clear away the veil of rain. He was immediately gripped by that special feeling of terror that had consumed him for so long – had he had time to estimate its intensity he'd have given it a 20 out of a possible 10. There was no ball hat riding above the face. It was matted in long, black, soaked and dripping hair, held in place across his forehead by a wide, colorful, headband. For the first time, he saw the features on that face – the features that had slipped all memory on the night of the attack in the street. Most of all he saw the headband – the terrifying headband in dirty stripes of red, white, and blue. It screamed at him – alarm, horror, dread, terror, panic. Again, his temples throbbed and his heart pounded. His vision blurred. He must not lose his grip. He must not pass out.

Suddenly, the face undertook a transformation; not the face, perhaps, but Ricky's sense of that face. It was vague and muddled at first, then quickly clarified. The terror melted away as rapidly as it had overtaken him. A wonderful image flashed across his mind – a saluting soldier dressed in an army uniform smiling at him through a frame. The square opening above him suggested a similar border. The face was older, but it could not be denied; it was that soldier's face.

"Dad?

"Son!"

"Are you coming after me with a knife?"

"Goodness no! Let's get you out of there while you can still maintain a grip on that bat."

The man helped Ricky move his hands to the edge of the chimney. He removed the bat. Ricky was able to manage the rest under his own power. Several minutes later they were both on the roof. The man, supported by one crutch, was standing facing Ricky who had seated himself on top of the barrel. His arms ached. His ribs ached. His still clinched fingers did not want to open. His body was drained.

With one glance to his left, Ricky understood – well, not really. What he did understand was that Limp Man was unconscious, sprawled out on his back with water running around him. Ever witty Ricky just couldn't resist. He looked up

at Crutch Man.

"We have to stop meeting like this, you know."

Crutch Man smiled and reached out placing his hand on the boy's shoulder. The strong steady grasp was reassuring beyond anything he had ever experienced.

Again, it was Ricky who spoke.

"I'm told we still have some ice cream to share from my fourth birthday party."

The man's face lit up. His eyes danced. He nodded.

"Strawberry. As a little tyke, you loved 'pawberrys'. It may have been the first word you spoke."

The tears they shared were immediately washed into oblivion by the continuing rain.

Suddenly the area was lit like midday. There was a spotlight helicopter flying low up above. There were orders from a blow horn coming from somebody standing in front of the suddenly open elevator.

"Stay where you are. Hands in the air. This is the police."

"And this is Ricky and Donald," Ricky shouted back, working his raised arms side to side.

Three officers and two civilians approached on the run.

"Father? Milton?" Ricky said registering more surprise in his voice than he had in his heart. "As you see you're just a smidgen late. Donald – dad – here, came to my rescue."

"Get them out of the weather," the police captain said as one of the officers attended to Limp Man.

"My wheelchair is down there against the wall," Ricky said pointing.

The other officer retrieved it and Ricky situated himself into his familiar old friend. For a split second, he let himself, for the first time, feel a twinge of sorrow at the realization that Betsy would soon be retired from his service. He would deal with that at another time.

Five minutes later they were downstairs making puddles on the expensive carpet in Jonathon's office – Ricky, Jonathon, Milton, Donald and the captain. The cleaning lady brought towels. The captain's radio crackled to life.

"Captain, the assailant's name is Martin Williams, in case that helps up there."

"Thank you; out."

Donald began to speak.

"Martin Williams was the cellmate of Ricky's uncle – Carl Barton. Carl apparently shared a good deal of information about his nephew along with his plan to extort money from Jonathon by kidnapping Ricky once he got out. Then, Carl was killed in the same fight that crippled Williams. When Williams was released it seems he took the plan on as his own. He even bought our old house."

"And you, dad or Donald or whoever you're going to be, I thought you were down in Westville, in a special hospital ward."

"I was down there, but *not* for treatment – to receive my pre-discharge examination. I was given a clean bill of health. Then, I came back here to the city not really sure what I was going to do. I must admit I followed you sometimes, Tommy, er Ricky, I guess it is now. That's when I ran across Williams. I did some research and soon understood his intentions."

"So, you scared him off at the bridge that night with your flashlight and you lowered the boom on him in the street the night he tried to abduct me?"

"Guilty on both charges. I have a letter here in my pocket – dripping wet now I guess – to Jonathon – your father – explaining what I knew. I was planning to deliver it to your mailbox this evening. Before I could do that, I saw you leave all alone and I followed. I had some difficulty with the night watchman here in the building, so I left and then sneaked back in through a side door, which is why I was so late up there."

It was Ricky's turn.

"I got some things worked out, too. The second I saw this man's face looking into the chimney, it came to me in a flash. It was the same face I saw at the moment I slipped into unconsciousness at the accident with mom when I was three."

He turned to Donald.

"You were there that day, weren't you?"

"I was. I had been following you two, although my intentions weren't so honorable at that time. I had been drinking and I was planning to confront your mother about letting me start visiting you. A moment after the accident, I rushed in to do what I could. I cradled your head in my hands

as you slipped into a coma. I was afraid you had died."

"See. That's when I saw the headband – red, white, and blue. In that instant, it became welded to my feeling of terror about the accident. That's the terror I've been reliving. It somehow also became attached to threatening strangers. I'll go and talk that part out with Doctor Wilson. He may be something better than a quack after all."

A question revealed itself on Donald's brow.

"May I ask how you – Jonathon – and Milton and the police knew to come here tonight?"

Jonathon answered.

"OUR bright son, Donald, had it all laid out for us on his desk. Milton found it when he went in to collect the glass from his snack. You tell the story, Milton."

"Yes, Sir. Well, there were three books lined up on Ricky's desk. The first two were lying open. The third, a children's book standing up like a tent. The first book was open to page 32. The other to page 41. 3241 is this address so it jumped out at me. The children's book was one of his Christmas favorites as a little boy, *Up On The Rooftop*. I reinterpreted the tent shape as 'roof'. Ricky and his chair and his jacket and his bat were gone. The message seemed clear. I told Mr. Wilford. He called the police and we rushed here in the wildest ride of my life."

"I suggest that butler, son, dad, and father all come back to our home now," Jonathon said. "We have lots of things to discuss and for two of you, nearly a lifetime to catch up on."

Milton wiped at the corners of his eyes. Ricky and Donald let the tears flow openly as they cherished those moments of just staring into each other's faces. Even Jonathon sniffed – more than once. That was, without a doubt, a record!

* * *

JOURNAL ENTRY:

Once we arrived home we all got into dry clothes. Abby served coffee and hot chocolate at the kitchen table. Father seldom ever sat there. Tonight was not an exception.

A few minutes after the rest of us had gathered, father

asked Donald and me to accompany him into his den. Donald took a seat in one of the two leather chairs that sit at conversational angles with each other in front of the desk. Father sat in the other one – the first time I remember ever seeing him sit anywhere in there other than behind his desk. I rolled into place between them and will never forget father's opening words.

"I have a dark secret. Tonight, at the time of this unbelievable reunion, I need to share it with the two of you. Although I hope it will remain among just us three, I cannot require that of you."

It was the strangest beginning to a conversation I have ever had with father – well, with anybody for that matter. He looked at Donald first and paused for a long moment. He repeated it with me. I'll quote him the best I can remember.

"The three of us are connected by that horrific accident twelve years ago that took the life of a struggling, loving, young mother, crippled an innocent child, and, I must imagine, added incalculably to your frightening condition, Donald"

Dad nodded. Father continued.

"Tonight, except for the loss of Ricky's – Tommy's – mother, things have taken a major upturn for us three. There are new relationships that have to be honed and will need to constantly be refined as we go forward. Those things please me as I'm sure they do you."

At that point I began wondering how any of that could be some big bad terrible thing – the apparent subject of the conversation as had been stated at the outset by father. Most everything he said brought joy to me. He held out his hand toward me and motioned with his fingers for me to take it – to hold it. I was pleased to follow his lead. He turned slightly in his chair and looked me directly in my face.

"Son, about the hit and run driver who killed your mother and crippled you – I was that driver. I was intoxicated after a night of revelry to celebrate my 27th birthday. It was the age at which I became a full partner in my father's law firm and I had taken celebration to the idiotic extreme.

"Your grandfather had spent his life defending the worst sort of humanity in criminal cases – the wealthy, worst sort of humanity. He understood exactly what to do to keep my name

in the clear. To be honest I was so drunk I didn't even know what I had done and don't remember it to this day. The damage to my front fender and the blood and flesh it carried put me at the scene.

"I will go into any details you want to have, son, but later. Let me continue. While my father worked to smooth things over I encountered a terrible case of the guilts – I believe that's the term used today."

I remember smiling because it was so unlike him to use slang of any kind. He went on.

"My father warned me to stay away and never make myself known to anybody associated with you. I couldn't do that.

"I kept track of your whereabouts from the hospital to a foster home and finally to the orphanage – much like your dad did, I assume."

Dad nodded, again.

"I approached the directors of the home with the story that I was interested in exploring the possibility of adopting a child. At that time, I had no intention of doing any such thing. I used it as an unconscionable ploy to get to see you. I figured once I discovered how well you were doing that I would be able to shed my guilt and get back to my merry bachelorhood.

"One gigantic thing went wrong with that plan. You looked up at me. Your handsome face looked lifeless. Your eyes were vacant. If something you wanted was just out of reach you made no effort to get it. You looked at me no differently than you looked at a chair or table or wall. An unbelievable sadness overtook me.

"I visited you a half dozen times within the next two weeks. I would always take you some little thing – a sack of candy, a book, a small toy. I would always talk to you. You seemed to listen and expressed increasing interest in what I brought, but you never said a word. One day while we were sitting together on the floor in the room where your crib was – we were rolling a ball back and forth between us – you scooted yourself over next me and put your hand on my leg.

"Now, my father – your grandfather, son – wasn't a toucher or a patter and I assumed the presence of your hand on my leg would be uncomfortable if not intolerable. It wasn't.

In fact it was like the warmth from your little fingers spread up inside me and lodged in my heart.

“And then you sealed the deal between us. You spoke. It was the first time since the accident. You looked up into my face and said: “I’ll go home with you, now.”

“I did my best to explain that couldn’t happen that day. You withdrew from me and sat back against your crib. That was as close to an emotion as you expressed over it. I left, both elated and heartbroken. That was when I began the processes of trying to adopt you. I became determined and single minded about it. Dozens of legal walls had been built apparently just to keep the two of us apart. Eventually my father came around and lent me a hand. Together we attacked each of the roadblocks one at a time, and finally the day came – three days before Christmas when you were three – that I was able to walk into your room at the orphanage and tell you I was ready to take you home.

“You cracked just the hint of a smile and gave the slightest indication of a single nod. It came off as if you really weren’t surprised. You looked around your room and moved to pick up one book – the only thing you wanted to bring along. It was the book I had brought you the week before for Christmas. I had read and reread it to you a dozen times in those few days – Up On The House Top.

“Ricky, I love you with every ounce of my being. We both know I have extreme difficulty expressing that physically, but please understand that in no way subtracts from my deep down forever feelings for you.”

All I could do was nod and sit there sobbing like a little kid. Maybe I was, sobbing like a little kid – the little kid who couldn’t sob or smile or relate to other people there on the floor of the orphanage. I gripped father’s hand tightly. I moved my other hand toward dad. He was clearly eager to take it in his. We just sat that way for some time.

I may eventually delete this section from my journal. On the one hand I don’t want people to know about father’s involvement in the accident. On the other hand I do want people to understand about his compassion and love and commitment to me. Knowing the events surrounding the accident explain why there has never been an ounce of

alcohol in this house. That's a tradition I will gladly continue.

This, having both a dad and a father is going to work out just fine, I think. It's a fully selfish arrangement. I recognize that. They each just get one boy, but I get two parents.

Father hinted there was a woman he wanted me to meet. Who knows? There may even be a third somewhere down the line.

Now, I think it is time for me to give Mother Nature a little assistance in the matter of the romantically recalcitrant, hired help!

Epilogue: TRANSCENDING TIME

Life took on wonderful new dimensions for Ricky and the people closest to him. There were weekly visits with his dad, more often when that seemed appropriate. At the outset, the two of them had very little in common, but Ricky loved the pastries his dad produced and his dad enjoyed the stories and snippets of his life that his son would share. Those were starting points. They took their time with the catching up process, which in essence, involved Ricky's entire life. They understood it would take a while. It really wasn't so much learning about each other's past as it was living together in the present and planning together for their future.

Donald and Abby traded recipes and Milton happily served as judge – all contests a draw. A job as an assistant pastry chef came up unexpectedly and Donald was soon able to afford an acceptable apartment. Ricky had his suspicions about how that had come about, but he never spoke of it.

Jonathon found that sharing a son between two fathers was not only possible, but allowed a wonderful set of relationships to grow and evolve. When Donald came to dinner, Jonathon was even known to remove his suit coat!

Much to Ricky's displeasure, the surgeon ordered him to spend most of his time in his wheelchair until the flesh at the ends of his stumps was fully healed. That would take not three days as he had estimated, but an additional two more weeks – an eternity in fifteen-year-old male time. In the meantime, he was allowed to practice walking on his new legs at home a few hours every day, and, just as he had expected,

every step provided joy beyond belief.

At school, wild rumors – based in ignorance of the facts – had spread about Ricky: monster legs, a crazy father, his secret life mixed up with convicts, and more. Livid about such unfairness, Susan and Jake took it upon themselves to set the record straight.

Ricky returned to school still in his wheelchair and, with the honest information circulated, he had actually become something of a hero – fighting off a vicious criminal high on the roof of an office building during a fierce thunder storm. (He smiled but didn't deny it! He was fifteen!!) In the halls at school everybody spoke to him. Girls smiled at him in class. Kids asked him to partner with them on projects. He was fully unprepared to handle that new role. He had never before thought of himself as anything more than tolerated by others let alone flirting with popular. The move up the social ladder from a handicapped nobody to the status of a more or less graceful hero remained uncomfortable.

He did his best – Ricky always did his best.

The evening arrived for the *Snow Ball*, the winter formal dance at his school. He again found himself waiting for Susan, having to make awkward small talk with her mother in the lavish entry hall of her home. It was truly less awkward than earlier, but facts were facts; he was a teen age boy and she was a mother age woman.

He looked at his watch. She was going to make them late. It was unlike her. He waited some more. He fought off his typical impatience about unnecessary delays by drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair.

Ten minutes later, at the moment the dance was to begin, she made her entrance down the stairway.

She was beautiful: A red bow in her long dark hair, her soft blue floor length gown and sparkly red slippers. She wore their trademark red scarf around her neck.

"You are simply gorgeous. You don't have to wear that scarf. I can carry it in my pocket."

"I love this scarf. I'd wear it even if it served no practical purpose."

Ricky smiled and offered her the corsage of red roses and baby breathe that he had been cradling in his lap. Her

mother helped her pin it on, not the activity for the boyfriend since her gown was strapless.

He did his best to help her drape her long coat over shoulders and they left.

Milton awaited them at the curb with an open rear door. It seemed odd to Ricky that he didn't appear impatient with the delay. He was typically a precise sort. Perhaps living with Ricky for so long had finally mellowed him.

Just as Ricky had feared, they seemed to be the last couple to arrive. What was, was, and he would deal with it. They hung their jackets in the large entry hall and Susan brushed his hair back from his forehead. He liked that and had been known to mess with it just so she would fix it. They moved on toward the closed double doors that led into the gym. Two freshman council members stationed there opened it for them.

It was dark inside. Only Ricky seemed puzzled.

A spotlight suddenly flooded the area, framing them there in the doorway. The band played one of those short 'da ... da, da ... da' things. The Emcee took to the microphone.

"It gives me great pleasure to present to you, this year's *Snow Ball* King and Queen, Ricky Wilford and Susan Flowers."

"You knew!" he whispered to her out of the corner of his mouth.

"Maybe."

Everyone clapped. Boys finger whistled. The Student Council President arranged the Crown and Tierra. A chaperone gently urged them out onto the floor. The spot light followed them. The band began playing a slow song.

"That's our signal to dance," Susan said, again in a whispered aside.

Ricky remained overwhelmed for only a moment. He was not a young man to be out done by a gaggle of secretive, conniving, ball planning females. He unbuckled his lap belt. He kicked back the foot rests. He stood and rolled his chair back toward the door. The room hushed. He held out his hand to Susan.

"May I have the honor of this dance, my Queen?"

All she had for him was a most unladylike gulp. He

moved close to her and took her in his arms. He began to dance. She began to follow. The stark silence that had overcome the huge room erupted into applause. It continued for the duration of the song. At the end, Ricky bowed to Susan. She curtsied to Ricky. They both waved to the others. The lights came up. A new song began and the floor was flooded by young people eager to expend their teen-years energy.

There are only a few moments in every person's life that transcend time, that always rush back on you full blown when you choose to remember them. Ricky had several. His first night in his new bed in his new room with his new father; the birds and bees talk with Milton; recognizing his dad's face, framed in the top of the chimney there above him on that stormy, November night atop the skyscraper; and the first time he moved across the gym floor under his own power and, fully unbelievably to him, dancing with the most beautiful girl at the Ball.