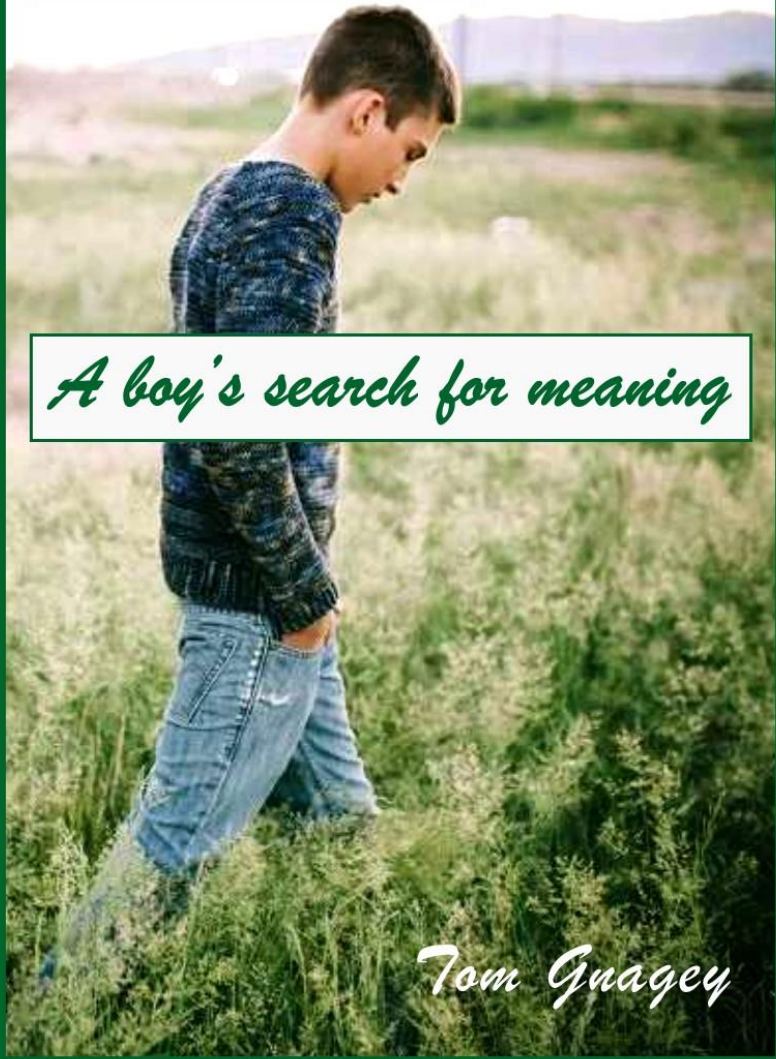


David

A boy's search for meaning

Tom Quagey



David

A teen boy's search for meaning

Book One in a series of two

For adults and young adults – fifteen and older

By

Tom Gnagey

© 2017

The Family of Man Press

///

Things You Will Want to Know Upfront.

From the Author

In my long life, I have written dozens and dozens of books for young adults and adults. Gratefully, most of them have been well-received. Later, you will see why this one is very special to me. My hope is that my readers will enjoy this story, also.

The reader should know, up-front, however, that in among the humor, fascinating characters and unlikely relationships, this book deals openly and honestly with weighty topics that are frequently on the minds of young people. If upsetting questions or feelings arise for you as you read, make sure you find a *responsible* adult with whom you can discuss your concerns. Some may want to read it *with* an adult – a parent, grandparent, or other trusted grownup. (A great way to build a relationship.) As the cover suggests, this is one teen boy's *very serious* search for meaning in his life.

Happy reading.

TDG

///

CHAPTER ONE

Introductions

Two weeks, plus a few days, had passed since the mid-December funeral. In its hundred-year history, the little, red brick, Methodist Church in Thomasville had never played host to such a gathering. Mourners had filled the pews and stood lining the outer aisles in front of the colorful, stained glass windows. The entrance hall was crowded, shoulder to shoulder, and overflowed, descending the seven, wide, front steps and spilling out across the lawn, which flanked the sidewalk that led to Center Street, where the long black hearse stood waiting. There were three thousand and a handful of residents in the small town; three thousand and a handful had attended the service. Most could not see the service. Most could not hear the service. Those things had not mattered. They needed to be there.

During the following weeks, the shock and disbelief had begun to fade for most folks, and they were doing their best to find ways of resuming life as it needed to be – all except Ralph. Ralph was a 12 year old mixed breed – mostly collie with bits and pieces of less recognizable, reddish ancestry. After the crowd at the cemetery had reluctantly disbursed, after the last shovel of dirt had been tamped into place, after the funeral director and the crew from the cemetery had all left, Ralph crept his way out of the late afternoon shadows toward the grave. He circled it once – slowly – nose to the ground, sniffing and whimpering – then lay down, chin on the grass, and ears at ease near the head of the low, black mound. No amount of coaxing had persuaded Ralph to return home. He seemed indifferent to the gentle strokes and familiar voices family members offered each day. They brought water and food – the food remained mostly untouched.

* * *

*The story now rewinds to the first week in December
– two and a half weeks earlier.*

It was to be a very busy week for David. Monday was already upon him.

“Remember,” David said over breakfast with his family, “The Christmas party out at the County Home is on Sunday afternoon.”

Most Sundays, David spent what time he could out there. Even the grumpiest and most down hearted of its 26 senior residents looked forward to D-Day, as they had come to refer to it. It had been going on for years.

He turned to Megan, his younger sister – an 8th grader.

“How are you and your friends coming on wrapping the presents for Happy, Sneezzy, Bashful – you know, the old folks?”

“We’ve finished with the 21 we have – still waiting on the last five.”

“I’ll have three of those ready by this evening,” his mother said.

“And I have the two for Grumpy and Doc at my office,” Mr. Baker added through a smile. “I’ll bring them home at noon.”

“The Winter Holiday band concert is on Tuesday evening at seven at the high school auditorium,” David said mostly as a reminder. “I’ll need to be there by six to help get the chairs set up on the stage.”

David, a Junior, played trombone – first chair. He was also band president and spent time helping the youngest members of his section get up to speed on the new music.

“Is your white dress shirt clean?” his mother asked.

“Clean enough, I suppose, that a couple shots of Lysol under each armpit should make it acceptable.”

“Bring it down before you leave for school and I’ll wash it.”

Megan rolled her eyes. Typically, that was her shorthand for ‘BOYS!’ and often around home, more pointedly, ‘BROTHERS!’

“Remember to get the final copy of your essay for the *Young Americans Speak* contest turned in by Friday,” his mother reminded David.

His title had not met with overwhelming approval there in his home – *The Looming Failure of Democracy in the United States*. His pieces had won the previous two years, but he felt rather sure his topic choice would preclude that, that year. It was not a problem since he had really written it for Mr. Johnson, the bank president, whose political beliefs David felt needed to be challenged. Mr. Johnson was one of the local judges.

“Remember, you promised to take me Christmas shopping after school today, benevolent and revered big brother, David.”

It had been the ten-year-old member of the family – Tommy. He was known within those walls as, ‘Tom the Atom Bomb’, which probably warrants little further explanation. He was fully convinced the town of Thomasville had been named for him – just had to wait 97 years for his arrival.

“Come help me set out the football team’s equipment at 3:30 and we can go right from there. Be sure to bring your money – I’m tapped out.”

“You’re always tapped out. Sounds good. I hate that stinkin’ locker room, you know. Teenage boys should come with Febreze. What time does the JV game start?”

“Five, and just you wait. Your time for stinking armpits isn’t all that far off, loved one who is just baby steps ahead of big boy hormones.”

Tommy nodded, unable to recall any mention of armpits in his father’s recent growing up talk, but then, some of the more fascinating stuff may have clouded the more mundane.

“That’ll work out fine,” Tommy said. “I already got dad’s gift and know what I’m getting mom. I figured I’d just skip Megan this year since her new boyfriend will probably bring her a wheelbarrow full of girly stuff in order to keep the kisses coming.”

He bent low and stuck his finger down his throat. The others would have been disappointed if he hadn’t – it was *Tommy* after all. In many homes, such a comment would have embarrassed a girl Megan’s age, but in theirs, everybody but Tommy understood how nature proceeded, and they respected each other’s abilities to appropriately manage their lives and maturing desires.

Tommy immediately went ahead and broke the momentary silence.

“Ah, okay if everybody’s gonna badger me about it, I’ll get her something – dumpsters aren’t emptied ‘til Wednesday.”

It was worth chuckles around the table; Tommy’s comments were typically worth chuckles; sometimes because they were actually funny but often because they were far too weird or esoteric for anybody to really understand – he was ten. He was a bright boy and often used wonderful, big words in ways they were never intended to be used – referring to his 5th grade teacher, Miss Wilson, as his current *pedagogue* for example. (Oh, no. That’s correct! There will be others.)

“You and I still need some practice time on our duet for the Christmas Eve service at church,” his mother said turning toward David. “The weeks will pass quickly. Don’t yell too loud at the JV game. You mustn’t let that beautiful baritone voice get hoarse. On *your* schedule, I suppose. You keep so busy.”

“I’ve got a slew of homework, but I should be finished by eight this evening. Your aged vocal chords still be awake by that hour?”

They exchanged smiles across the table. The others looked back and forth awaiting mom's reply.

"Risky, talking that way to the Elf who fills Christmas stockings around here, son."

Dad, Megan and Tommy nodded, scoring it a draw.

Mrs. Baker reached for the calendar and a pencil – nothing was ever entered on it in pen because life changed at a rapid pace around that household.

"So, tonight is the Bomb's shopping and dumpster diving outing, David's and Mom's practice, David's attendance at the JV game. Is that it?"

It seemed to have been. After looking at the others she continued.

"Tuesday night is the band concert at seven – David there by six."

She paused. No additions?

"Wednesday night is choir practice at church. Megan and Tommy will take care of each other here at the house and most likely surprise their loving, hard working mother by vacuuming the living room and picking up their bedrooms."

"Thursday night is family game night. I suppose we can pass on that if you kids are too busy this close to Christmas."

"No. We don't pass on it."

"Never!"

"Nuh uh!"

"That seems to be unanimous. Chalk one up to family camaraderie."

"Friday, David's essay is due."

"And *my* book report," Tommy added.

"What are you reporting on," David asked.

"Don't know yet. I'm thinking *Moby Dick*."

"That's four hundred pages long, bro."

"Oh! Then, maybe it'll be *Finding Nemo*."

Who knew? He may have already had the book read and the report finished, but then of course . . . For all Tommy's energy and enthusiasm, he was remarkably organized for a ten-year-old – a ten-year-old going on thirty! His parents wisely gave him a good deal of freedom – his leash was longer and more frequently available than those of most of his friends.

“And Saturday. The Winter Dance for David,” she said at last. “Anything else?”

“I’m not going to the dance,” David said.

The others turned to look at him, their foreheads drawn. Tommy seized upon the distraction to take the last piece of bacon from his sister’s plate.

“Not going?” his mother asked trying not to sound distressed, but sounding distressed. “You have to go. You’re the chairman.”

“I’ve done my part – decorations, band, refreshments, enlisting Officer Mallard to frisk those boys who have been known to bring a flask for the punch bowl. It will go off like clockwork whether I’m there or not.”

“What will Sue, think?” Megan asked momentarily searching for the piece of bacon she thought she had left.

“Sue’s going with Billy. She’s my friend since preschool – not my *girlfriend*. I can’t see why you people can’t get that through your heads.”

“You know there are lots of girls who would give most anything to go with you – tall, dark, handsome, super popular, brother of mine,” Megan said, teasing less than it sounded.

“I’m surprised, too,” his mother said. “All that work and none of the fun. I don’t understand.”

David pounded the table with the ends of both fists and stood up. His face turned red. He raised his voice.

“It’s not your place to understand! I said I wasn’t going, now get off my back.”

He stormed up to his room.

It hadn’t, of course, been the boy’s first unpredictable outburst – he was seventeen after all. His father understood about being an adolescent boy. His mother, never having been one, had to play it by ear. She’d be the expert once their next-in-line hit that stage.

Ralph lumbered up the stairs after David.

Ralph had followed David home one Saturday when the lad was five. Upon questioning, David could remember neither where he had run across the pup nor, for that matter, all the places he’d been that morning. Ralph stayed despite the ad placed in the local paper.

During his preschool years, Davy had made it his early Saturday morning duty to bounce from house to house – those populated by older folks – to enjoy toast or cocoa, or a donut, and spread the gossip from one breakfast table to the next. Everybody knew Davy. Everybody loved Davy. Many, many older folks counted on Davy/David to be there for them when they needed something – an errand, a sidewalk shoveled, reaching something from a top shelf or retrieving something out of the crawl space. As hard as he tried to grow into *David*, in the eyes of most folks there in Thomasville, he would forever be their beloved little *Davy*. Once, when complaining about it at the dinner table he said: “They’ll probably try and carve ‘Davy’ on my tombstone!”

He could smile about it.

A few minutes later he reentered the kitchen bundled up against the thirty-degree weather outside, backpack slung across one shoulder, and instrument case in tow. He placed his white shirt on the table beside his mother and kissed her on her cheek the way he had done when leaving the house for as long as both could remember.

“Sorry about that, guys. Got stuff, I guess.”

He left the house.

They all assumed he *had stuff*. Everybody had *stuff*. It was how David’s stuff seemed to be affecting him that was becoming distressing.

Half an hour later, the others had all gone their separate ways; Mr. Baker to his office, Megan to Jefferson Jr. High School; Tommy to Washington Grade School. Mrs. Baker hurriedly added the Old Folks’ Home Party on Sunday’s square on the calendar and secured it back under the sunflower magnet on the front of the refrigerator. She was usually the last to leave since she began her half day of work at the Library at ten.

David honestly felt bad about his outburst. He had no more idea what it was all about than his family did. Well, probably a *little* more. Much of life had become confusing recently. The high school counselor had once referred to adolescence as ‘addled-essence’, *addled* referring to confused and mixed up. With *that*, David was in full agreement.

By the time he got to the band room, he had shifted gears from the less often seen, 'addled-David', to the almost always seen, 'take charge-David'. His wonderful smile emerged naturally and a degree of the pep earlier lost, returned to his step.

As he assembled his trombone, his three young protégés entered the band room. They each had wonderful things to tell him, which were clearly more important to them than practice time. That was how it was for David – everybody either had things to tell him or had questions for him. In the halls and on the streets, everybody smiled and spoke to him. Earlier in the school year there had been a dance and he had taken a girl who was brand new to the school. She had commented that she'd been watching him and said that she had never known a student who teachers apparently treated as their equal – asking his opinion, getting his permission and such. *They* seemed apologetic *to him* when he didn't make the highest grade on a test – which virtually never happened.

Eventually, the practice session concluded. David had something positive to say to each one of the three. They beamed. Even though nobody gave compliments more freely than David – when they were deserved – folks treasured them from him. He just treated others the way he liked to be treated – recognize his good stuff and don't dwell on his bad stuff. That was pretty much how things had always been in his home. Unlike many boys his age, he had taken time to appreciate *that*, along with many other comfortable things about his home and family. He felt fortunate to be a part of it.

Everybody believed David was their friend. The way David saw it, he had only a few friends – not the kind with whom one shared their deepest feelings and questions about life and living it – but together they managed to have good times. In some ways, David was the center of the universe to the many of the adults and most of the kids there in his little town, but even so, David really didn't feel connected. He found himself in an odd situation for a boy his age: people of all ages depended on him, looked up to him beyond what seemed reasonable, and would have thought it out of place if their David would have had things on his mind that he wanted or needed to talk about. He had tried, once, to speak with the counselor at school, but upon entering his office the man began asking for advice on how to help several of the long-term problem boys who had just been suspended. He didn't know why, but recently he had been unable to talk with his father about his serious concerns. It may have been that he believed to admit he didn't have life all worked out in perfect order at 17, would make him a disappointment to the man he admired most of all. He wouldn't have, of course. The reality was, David had virtually nobody with whom to talk about the important issues of life. Important issues for David tended to be on a different plane than for most kids his age.

That was not entirely true. He could talk about *anything* with Ralph, often going on for hours at a time. Ralph displayed not so much as a whimper of discomfort or a limp tail of boredom. All he required in return was a good ear scratching every so often.

CHAPTER TWO

Busy, Busy, Busy

No sooner had he taken his seat in first period chemistry than Mrs. Hilliard called Mr. Williams, his teacher, to the door. She was the Holiday Dance sponsor.

“David, you are needed elsewhere,” he said. “Someday you may actually make it through an entire period. None of us will know how to react.”

He offered a warm smile.

Without the teacher’s comment, the other students would not have given it a second thought – David was really neither student nor faculty. He drifted in a category of his own. On his way out of the room, he glanced at Sue who nodded. She would see that he got her notes.

In the hall, the news from Mrs. Hilliard was not good. The band they had hired for the dance on Saturday had cancelled. Mrs. Hilliard was falling apart over it and clearly looked to David for the solution.

“Worst case scenario – we play CDs, Mrs. Hilliard. Let me see if Mr. Carter knows of a band that might still be available at this late date. Do I need a hall pass to go down to the band room?”

“Of course not, David. Everybody knows you run the school.”

It sounded like a teacher offering a faint, somewhat sarcastic, compliment. In reality, it was the truth and both understood that.

Beginner’s Band was first period. He didn’t knock, but entered and waited inside the door while they finished mutilating their first attempt at a new medley of Christmas Carols. Mr. Carter walked over to him.

“Got time to sit in with us?” he asked with a big smile.

“Afraid not.”

The students offered a group moan of disappointment. They loved it when he joined in with them. At some point, he would usually stand up and offer a trombone solo that was not on the music.

David stated his problem in quiet tones. Mr. Carter had two suggestions and David wrote them on his assignment pad – the pad that was usually too full of other things to leave room for assignments. He depended on Sue for that. She was happy to make the nightly call to make sure he was on track with things. She would have been happier if he had been on track to understanding her feelings for him.

She and her friends couldn't figure if he was just too busy for such things or if he kept too busy in order to avoid such things. Sue was not one to give up!

He would contact the bands right away. It made his tight schedule even tighter. That was alright. He would work it out. He always did. The dance was to be held in the girls' gym – the old gym, of course. The freshman and sophomore girls went to study hall instead of to physical education that week while it was being decorated. That pleased most of them. The Junior girls and a few boys spent the time decorating – making a billion colorful flowers out of crepe paper and winding them on white trellises and lattice fences borrowed from the local Home Improvement Store. The theme was, *'Evening in an Old-Fashioned Garden'*. It had been David's suggestion or maybe his mother's, but he got credit for it. Around the edge of the dance floor they were laying artificial grass loaned from local funeral parlors. It lay loosely and somebody always tripped on it, but no one had ever broken anything. That was where the chairs and snack table would be located. It was where a dozen boys would stand, awkwardly looking out of place because they had been too timid – no, too afraid – to ask a girl. It was where David would be if he decided to show up. Potted plants would separate the grass from the gym floor – the dance floor. The foods classes were in charge of cookies and punch. David had set up committees, which divided the huge overall task into many small and manageable assignments.

Since he was legitimately out of chemistry class, he slipped out to the gym to see how things were going. Many had questions for him. Most everybody had suggestions for him. He listened and thanked them – even wrote some down on his pad. He had a way of making everybody feel important. If he had any enemies he was not aware of them.

He looked around and figured most things were on schedule. The shop boys were getting ready to hang the moon – a large, white plastic, globe lit from the inside by bulbs that automatically faded among white, blue and lavender tones. David had designed it with the help of the president of the shop club. Some night he would do a dry run with both Mrs. Hilliard and the principal present to see how much additional light they were going to demand. It seemed like they had never been teenagers and remembered nothing about wanting privacy at that age. Or, perhaps they *had* been, and remembered all too well. That made David smile.

David had two types of smiles. One was like that one, spontaneous and genuine. The other, and the one most often present, was the required smile that projected his sense of confidence and friendship and reassurance. Many days that one wore thin – at least from the inside.

He climbed to the top of the bleachers where he sat and made the calls to the bands, knowing he was stretching even the wide-ranging limits the school afforded him. He had never heard either one of the bands play and needed to make sure neither played ‘old peoples’ music. That would necessitate either attending one of their practices or getting a CD to listen to. Sue would be good help in making that decision. He arranged for a CD from each that would be dropped off at the school office later that morning. The imp in him decided to let Mrs. Hilliard fret a bit longer over the problem. She was one of those by-the-book teachers whose face had been born without the capacity to smile. The atmosphere in her classes was not bad, but not comfortable – tight and serious rather than loose and open. Also, she had not been born with a sense of humor. Part of him was surprised at his impulse to punish her. He was even more surprised by the genuine smile *that* planted on his face. He justified his action – or inaction, depending on how one looked at it – by telling himself the problem really had not been solved yet so he had no solution to deliver to her. Once she had placed it in his lap, she probably hadn’t given it another thought. That’s how things went – David will handle it.

It was ten minutes until the bell. He sat back in the shadows and looked down at the kids. He wondered what sorts of things they were thinking about. Oh, he knew there was a lot of thinking and talking about who was doing what with whom. David disliked that sort of conversation. It was shallow and moved a person's life in no useful direction. He was more into thinking about the great questions of the universe and society: Why hatred existed? Did life have a purpose? If it did, how was he supposed to find it? How some people were greedy and experienced no guilt over it. How some folks seemed to hurt others with no remorse. How to do away with poverty and sickness. How reasonable was it to believe the universe had been created and was directed by some all-powerful, unexplainable being, who was even more unexplainable than the existence of the universe, itself. His list went on. He often talked late into the night with Ralph about such concerns. He sometimes smiled at the possibility that Ralph really understood and knew the answers to his questions, but just couldn't communicate them to him. He figured that would have made Ralph sad. A more important question, he figured, was why he even let himself contemplate the existence of an all-knowing dog! Perhaps it made as much sense as contemplating an all-knowing anything.

David was genuinely concerned about political forces in the country, which he believed not only were not in the best interest of the citizens, but were well on their way to destroying society as people needed it to be. None of the other guys appeared to expend any mental energy with such concerns and since that was what he wanted in best friends, he had none – well, there was the yet to be introduced, T.J.

Reverend Coffelt, his minister, who would sometimes listen to David rant on about things, once asked him if the reason he kept himself so burdened by helping everybody else have a carefree life – why he took on the responsibilities so nobody else would have to – was to assure that he would not to have time to be bothered by the tough personal questions himself.

It had been a great question and David appreciated it. He had no answer and kept himself far too busy to have time to consider it. Hmm?

At noon, as usual, he ate with Sue. She was finished by the time he got to the lunch room, but had waited patiently in their spot at a corner table – he was usually late, having things that needed to be taken care of first. After filling his tray, he stopped to speak with a new transfer who was sitting by himself. He asked him to join the two of them. Sue was happy to include him and after the first five minutes had him fixed up with Amy – well, in the back of her head, anyway. They learned his father was a carpenter and how he hoped to follow in his footsteps. Before they left the cafeteria, David introduced him to the president of the Shop Club and soon the two of them had their heads together about some project the Club was working on.

“So, you got your big boy clothes ready for the dance?” Sue asked David as they made their way to their lockers.

“Everything I’ll need.”

“I don’t like that answer. It means you aren’t intending to go, doesn’t it?”

“Does it, now?”

He offered his stock smile.

“I’ve known you longer than anybody in this school and I still can’t figure you sometimes. You go to all the work to create this wonderful evening and then you aren’t even going to show up?”

“I didn’t create it for me; I created it for the rest of the student body. I’m not a big fan of dancing and getting dressed up and making small talk while acting like somebody I’m not.”

“There’s some talk about why you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“And if I had one, there’d be talk about why I had *that* girlfriend. Nothing to concern yourself about. If my time were taken up with a girlfriend, this school would fall apart and you know it.”

Sue shrugged. It was true, but still, a great guy like David needed a great girl – goodness knows she had tired. She knew he disliked ‘fake’ people and quite frankly, many of the girls were just that. Everything they did and said had more to do with how they wanted to be seen fitting into the social group than anything about who they wanted to be deep down inside. David spent the free time he had thinking about things even Sue didn’t always understand, but when he’d talk with her about them, she was always eager to listen. Those were special times for her. In some ways, they were special for him as well.

David was just not like other boys. His feet appeared to be firmly planted in reality, but his head soared somewhere up above the clouds, thinking thoughts nobody had probably ever thought before. In a way, she could understand why no girl maintained his interest. She hated that he was missing out on that part of being a teen-ager. In her most secret fantasies, she imagined him having a private, passionate affair with a beautiful girl from a nearby town. Typically, that girl looked a lot like her.

Last period, he had advanced placement Literature in which there were only nine students. There was a substitute teacher that day. The assignment had been to write a reaction to Joyce Kilmer’s poem, *Trees*. David waited and volunteered last. It was always his preference so he could first hear what the others had thought. His take on it was short and to the point as was also his tendency in everything other than working on the big thoughts that privately careened through his mind.

“I think you’ve all missed the point and over analyzed. I think the poem merely reflects on how there is a universality between man and the rest of nature – an anthropomorphized tree used to illustrate that relationship. Think about the simplicity of the language as if explaining the tree through the eyes of a youngster who didn’t distinguish between the artificial lines typically drawn between nature’s creations. And, by the way, every one of you referred to Joyce Kilmer as ‘she’. Kilmer – actually Alfred Joyce Kilmer – was a young man who wrote the poem at age 27, so he couldn’t have had the wisdom many of you attributed to his motives in your interpretations.”

After class, he hung behind to speak with the teacher. A new mind was suddenly available to him. Perhaps new insights, even though she, also, had referred to Kilmer as she.

“Sorry if I was out of line. I seem to have a burr up my – er, in my shorts the past few weeks. Not sure why, but I find myself saying what’s really on my mind instead of what I believe folks need to hear. Again, sorry if I disrupted things.”

Her response was one of those anemic, ‘what she believed folks wanted to hear’, comments, so David brushed it off and left. Hers would not be a mind in which he would be interested. Another disappointing adult.

After school, Tommy was waiting for him at the locker room door, opting not to enter the nose-holding environment until absolutely necessary. Before entering, he took a deep breath and held it, as if to protect himself from what he characterized as the atrocious, big-boy stink. He was actually a good helper. Later, the shopping went fast – it was two males, after all.

Because of all his homework, David decided to skip the JV game. He knew the players would be disappointed, but he was just too busy. He continued through his necessary routine of commitments and finished his homework on the stroke of eight – just like he promised his mother. They practiced the duet for church – she played the piano and they both sang. They had done it often down through the years with David maturing from soprano, through a crackling alto, to Baritone.

“I sure have an urge to break into a short soft shoe routine between the chorus and the refrain, but you’ll say I should *refrain* from that, *of chorus*.”

His father threw a small pillow at him from across the Livingroom where he’d been sitting on the couch, listening. It made for a good chuckle and pretty-well characterized the positive relationship the members of that family had created for themselves through the years. That had been due in no small part to David’s ability to see humor where many missed it. As the eldest child, his influence had helped set and direct the personality of the family. At times, a blindfolded outsider might have had difficulty figuring which of them was the father. David’s forceful personality typically influenced, if not directed, life at home, as it did everywhere. In the past, that had occurred in thoughtful, subtle ways. Recently, it had been more direct – like his uncharacteristically direct comments in English and his outburst at breakfast. His parents attributed it to his age and accommodated to it when they could.

After practice, David found himself with an hour all to himself – those times had become precious. He got ready for bed, called the new kid to see if he needed anything – he didn’t, but thanked him for the connection with the shop kid – and propped himself into reading position against the head of his bed. His mother knocked.

“Come in if you aren’t bothered by a guy reclining in his Irish-plaid undershorts.”

She entered and refrained from stating the first response that came into her mind.

She had brought his freshly laundered shirt in addition to a tray.

“Thought you could use a sandwich and milk. You seem to be getting thin around the edges, lately.”

“I’m growing again. I suppose those edges are just stretching a bit right now. Thanks for the goodies. Love you.”

She hung up his shirt, turned and left, understanding her son was focused on something else. It was the third, perhaps the fifth, time he had read the book – *Language and Thought in Action*, written by a linguist, S.I. Hayakawa. Among other things, it was about how each person attaches his own unique meaning to most words – slightly different from everybody else. David was fascinated by things like that. He tried to work what he learned there into his every day conversations with others as well as into those private ones he had inside his head. Bottom line, never assume anybody else means precisely the same thing you do by any given word – beautiful, happy, good, bad, delicious, sexy, and especially the names of people. People come to know and characterize another person in a wide variety of ways – none of them probably completely accurate.

He was interrupted again when the minister called him about the overnight campout for the junior high class on Friday night. David had volunteered to go along only if somebody else couldn't be found. Somebody had been found. David was relieved. After he hung up, he called the new kid back – he had a 7th grade brother – and invited the boy to join the overnight. It was left open depending on his father's decision.

David read for some time, then put the book away, made sure his phone was set to awaken him at six thirty, and turned off the light. He drifted off thinking that while Shakespeare had declared a rose by any other name was essentially still a rose – having the same aroma – Hayakawa implied that a rose, even though it was called a rose by everybody, was really different to everybody in precisely what they meant by the word. It was worth a smile and presented no conflict as far as he was concerned.

When younger, always on the go David had a history of sleeping well. Head to the pillow, eyes closed, sawing logs almost immediately. More recently – since his sophomore year, actually – there seemed to often be thoughts that attacked him at bedtime like barbs on a raspberry bush. They just couldn't be ignored. *That* night he slept well.

CHAPTER THREE

Uncomfortable Binds

When the alarm beeped, David rolled over onto his back, stretched and checked his watch just to make sure the alarm had been accurate. David led a life in which precision was important. He allowed himself ten minutes in the shower and five more for hair combing, mouth-washing, zit medicating, and checking to see if he needed to shave – he was sure that some morning he would. Since he was thirteen, he had kept his upper lip fuzz-free. To him, fuzzy upper lips looked revolting.

He had asked Sue to pick up the bands' CDs, listen to them, and give him her impressions. That was plural – impressions. David never stopped with one impression, or one alternative, or one answer without considering as many others as seemed available. While he dressed, he called Sue for her take on the bands. She had ruled one in and one out. He would listen to the 'in' before homeroom and probably go with it. Sue said she'd make the arrangements once the decision had been made.

At breakfast, the family avoided topics they figured might set off David. It made for a quiet time.

Tommy was pleased with *that*, because he really wanted to talk about Christmas. His list kept growing and he managed to get updated copies of it to the family members he felt were the most likely suckers – that is, who would be the most willing to make sure the dear youngest member of the family would not be disappointed. He was the imp of the family.

"I've been thinking, I'd rather not get gifts this year," David said. "There isn't anything I need. The Youth Service Bureau serves lots of kids who won't get presents otherwise. Give mine to them, okay."

"You have to understand, son," his father began, "that a big part of giving gifts is the satisfaction the giver receives. You want to deprive us of that?"

David had never liked having his wishes challenged. At that moment, his inclination was to overturn the table, release an imaginative string of profane words and stalk out. He didn't. He shrugged and managed a faint, eyes on his plate, "Whatever."

He didn't understand what was coming over him. Suddenly he seemed filled with anger, depression, confusion. Even though he was aware that it was normal for teens to feel those ways from time to time, he dismissed it by thinking he should be above such things. He felt he was being squeezed on all sides, largely by the binds he had made for himself – his commitments, in particular, but also, the reputation he had established as everybody's go-to guy. For most of his life he had sought it – luxuriated in it, even – the prestige it provided him, the spotless reputation he had created, the role of the wise counselor he had established. He never passed anybody in the halls at school or on the sidewalks there in town but what he received a genuine, positive greeting. Old Mr. Martin always offered a wink, Grandma Thompson always took his hand and patted it, the youngsters managed high-fives or thumbs up when beyond the reach of melding palms.

In his mind, it had come to seem he was just living his life for others. It was like he was the only one who realized what a lousy place the world had become and, for some reason, it had become his job to protect everybody from those evil forces – to make life go on just hunky-dory for them. Every time he smiled at somebody he felt he was flashing a lie.

For better or worse, and as his minister had noted, David had become skillful at putting things that he didn't want to contemplate, out of mind. Once he left home mornings, he effectively padlocked the door on those kinds of feelings, turned up his smile, picked up his pace and proceeded in his role as guardian of his world.

Perhaps he believed everybody else was incompetent – that he was the only one who had the right answers and skills. If true, of course, that would rightfully put the burden of mankind’s future squarely on his shoulders. Something was wrong. He understood that about himself. In fact, he understood it was not an indicator of ideal adjustment for a boy his age – something else to put out of his mind.

Bright people often see everybody else as incompetent or at least less competent. Most just leave it at that and move on with their lives. Some, like David, who have been raised to believe the welfare of all human beings is everybody’s responsibility, can’t do that in good conscience. For a few, it becomes an overriding compulsion to fix things for everybody – seldom an entirely good thing, for that person at least.

Sue met him at their usual spot, the corner, four blocks away from school. She had the CD ready to play and they listened together as they walked.

“Pretty good, really,” David said. “If anybody asks, let’s just say the name of the band will be a surprise. Advertising the *‘Festering Abscesses’* as our music, might cause problems with the faculty. If pressed, I suppose we could say it is locally known – meaning by you and me – as, FA.”

He changed the topic.

“You have a good evening, last night?”

“Yeah. Mom did the final try-on of the dress I’m wearing to the Winter Dance. I really like it.”

“What color?” David asked, like most boys having no idea what aspects of it might be important to her.

“Petal pink – real soft with a white, open lace jacket.”

“Sounds nice. Glad you’re pleased. You’re lucky your mom is so talented that way.”

“I am. Billy decided to wear a suit instead of putting money on a Tux. I’m glad he did that. Money doesn’t come easily for his family.”

David nodded, figuring that topic had run its course. For the first time, he allowed a judgmental feeling about his decision not to attend. It vacillated between thinking it was a fine decision, and wondering if he were missing something he'd regret later. He put it out of mind and offered an inappropriate smile. He would have chosen to wear his suit, also. There in Thomasville, it was mostly the half-dozen snobs that wore tuxes – the super snobs wore pink or blue ones.

He had never been able to understand how a guy could think he was somehow improved as a human being by spending more money than anybody else on his clothes or haircuts or cars or parties – he could go on. They were the ones who splurged on orchids and limos as well. They were also the ones who thought a good time could not be had without alcohol. Perhaps for them, as shallow as they were, it might have been true. He decided to defer further thought on that topic until later.

“Ready for the Band Concert tonight?” Sue asked as they walked.

David shrugged.

“Suppose so. Guess I hadn't thought about it in terms of being ready or not – I know the songs, so unless I lose my pucker I guess there isn't much that can go wrong. T. J. and I will set up the chairs on stage in the auditorium, beforehand.”

“You and T. J. seem to be getting to be pretty good friends lately.”

“Maybe. I guess so. Hadn't given it much thought. He's a lot like you.”

“Meaning I'm masculine or he's feminine?”

It was cause for a genuine smile from David.

“Your minds, I mean. Most kids just see T.J.'s outer shell – a smoker, a drinker, a sex nut. Once I got past all those things, I found he is a very compatible thinker. He's smarter than anybody would guess – learns what he wants to rather than what the teachers want him to.”

“You do both.”

“I am me. He is he – or him, or whatever. I find it easy to look past certain things about him, and, like you, he has found some way to look past my holier than thou attitude.”

“Holier than thou? You? Nobody thinks about you that way.”

“Glad they aren’t soul-readers, then. Probably should drop that. To thoughtfully answer your question about T.J. and me, yes, I suppose I’ve grown to really feel comfortable around him. Are you thinking I should have asked your permission, first?”

“Gosh no. You know me better than that.”

“I do. Sorry. Something seems to be eating at me recently. I suppose you’ve noticed.”

“Not really. If I should have, I apologize.”

“Neither more attention nor an apologize will be necessary. You know I’d never trade our relationship for any other.”

“You will when you get married.”

“I guess that’s one of those if and when things. No reason to tarnish the present with thoughts about the unknown. I finished my essay. Probably turn it in this afternoon or tomorrow morning. The judges will hate it this year – at least if I have been successful in making my points, at least one of them will hate it.”

“You aren’t in the contest to win this year?”

“Come now. I’ve never been in it to win. I’ve been in to clarify my own thinking on the topic and state my conclusions clearly.”

Sue sighed.

“I know. You are the least, ‘I want to win’, person God ever created. At the end of a cross-country race you slow down so the guy coming in second won’t feel he has been beaten so badly. Can I wish you good luck, anyway?”

“You may, of course what *you* mean by good luck is most likely not what *I* mean by good luck.”

“You’ve dragged out Hayakawa, again, haven’t you?”

“Do you realize you are the only being in the entire universe – other than Ralph, maybe – who could have come to that conclusion?”

“Glad to be included in such good company. How is old Ralph these days?”

“His arthritis and heart problems bother him – loses his breath easily so I don’t run with him anymore. He’s getting really old – 91 in human years. Remember when I first got him? He followed me home from who knows where as a very young pup – him not me – well! Dad figured somebody had dropped him off here in town to get rid of him. My grand gain, and the ‘dropper-offer’s’ forever loss. My fear is that some morning soon I’ll wake up and he won’t. I know that day has to come, but I hate that it does. Same with dad and mom – someday. I hate that, too. Sometimes when I contemplate it, I have trouble catching my breath, I get light headed and feel such a tremendous sense of loss I can’t see how I’ll ever possibly manage.”

“My grandfather says, ‘never grieve before you have to.’ That’s what it sounds like you’re doing.”

David offered a somewhat delayed nod.

“Thanks for that. Be assured it will be given due consideration.”

It was Sue’s turn to shrug with no words.

For several minutes, they had been leaning back against the wide, cement railing that flanked the six steps that led up to the rambling, old, gray stone, school building. *Open Bell* rang – it meant students could enter the campus. Clearly, the two of them had inadvertently over-jumped the schedule. Inside, they went their separate ways.

“He is just the finest guy ever,” she said to herself.

“She is just the finest guy ever,” he said to himself.

Sue enjoyed her accompanying fantasies.

David had no accompanying fantasies. BOYS!

It seemed that, together, they had just proved Hayakawa’s principle – no two people mean exactly the same thing by the same word or phrase.

The school day went like school days went for David. The dance was on track. The paper flowers were just about all in place. Later in the week, he would meet the principal and Mrs. Hilliard at the gym and negotiate about the lighting. The boy’s uniform for the concert was white shirt, tie and dark dress slacks – dress shoes for those who had them.

David liked to run, so, after school, having no trombone case to carry that day, he ran home for an early dinner; it involved playing leapfrog with fire hydrants and vaulting low picket fences. After a soup and sandwich supper, he dressed for the concert and was back at the auditorium a little before six to meet T.J. to set up the chairs on stage. T.J. played baritone sax. Mr. Carter had left a diagram of how the chairs needed to be arranged. He already had the risers in place. There was a note saying he would be down in the band room at 6:30 if they needed him. They wouldn't and he knew that.

The boys talked as they worked.

"How long have we known each other?" David asked.

"I moved here in fourth grade. Joined the band in fifth. Not sure when to say we got to know each other. We've been calling each other by our names since then if that's what it means."

"I'm thinking it wasn't until probably September of this year – to really know each other I mean," David said.

"The 'girl talk' after band practice that night – that what you referring to?"

"Yeah. First time I can remember we'd ever exchanged more than a single phrase with each other."

"I was trying to set you up, you know," T.J. said.

"Set me up. No, I don't understand."

"I thought you were a goodie-goodie who'd just turn red and wilt away if I said the word sex, let alone asked what you thought about it."

"Sorry if I disappointed you. Can't remember a single time I've wilted over any topic. I've undoubtedly turned red on a few occasions."

"I know that now, but not then. You just took up the topic like it was a typical, every day sort of conversation for you."

"And?"

"And, like I said, I hadn't expected it to be like that. Suddenly, I found that I was the uncomfortable one. I thought I'd just embarrass you and you'd find an excuse to leave."

"As I recall I *did* find an excuse to leave – about two hours later."

Smiles.

"That was one far-ranging discussion, wasn't it," David said.

"It was. Very few topics didn't get our onceover that night. Probably the best thoughtful conversation I'd ever had in my life up to that time. Thanks for that, by the way."

David nodded. It was followed by a minute or so of silence. Then T.J. continued.

"I know you don't approve of my life style, Dave, especially when it comes to girls. I know I'm a cad – old love 'em and leave 'em T.J. I'm working up to a question in case you're wondering."

"You're always working up to a question. It is why I keep you around."

More smiles.

"Here it is. I'm addicted to cigarettes. I drink myself to sleep almost every night. I try not to go to sleep at night unless I've had a girl that day. Those are all things I know you abhor."

"And," David interrupted offering a confidential tone, "I really don't like them, either!"

Still more smiles. T.J. continued.

"These past few months I've come to think of you as my best friend and yet we are as different as a . . . a dandelion and a . . . manhole. I don't understand why we are friends. Do you? *That*, finally, was my question."

"I couldn't be comfortable living like you live, in fact, I would be very uncomfortable knowing what I think I know about booze, smokes and guys who use women. Clearly, *I* don't know what *you* know about those things, so I have no basis to judge you up or down on them. Those are your things, not mine. But, we share a wonderful desire to ask meaningful questions about life and the world and think about them like nobody else I've ever met. That's why I enjoy being around you. I don't have to like or approve of everything about you to manage a mutually beneficial relationship. But you know all that – surely you do."

"Yeah. Guess I just needed to hear you say it. From my side of the relationship there is one other important thing. You've never tried to change me. Everybody, *always*, tries to change me."

“I suppose I can say the same – you’d never think of offering me a cigarette or a drink or try to set me up with a bimbo.”

“*Bimbo*? Really? Has anybody actually used that term since 1935?”

“What term would you prefer?”

“My terms all disparage the female of our species and you’d never use them, so let’s go with *Bimbo*.”

“I’m going to ask you something T.J., but you know you always have the right not to answer – we agreed on that early on. How did you come to disrespect girls and women so completely? Sometimes it seems to me you have as a main goal in your life to prove to all females they are no good. Use ‘em and leave ‘em as you put it.”

“I said, *love ‘em and leave ‘em*, but I suppose for me those two words mean the same thing – love, use. It’s such a long story we’ll need to deal with it later. It is interesting, though, until you asked the question just now I’d never really looked at it that way – me trying to prove to the girls how bad *they* are. Hmm. I guess I figured it was more like me trying to prove to myself that the ideas of *love* and *romance* were pure fiction – fully unattainable and unnecessary. Romance, the way you talk about it, involves respect for the other person – a desire to have things go well for the other person even away from that time together. Girls are here for me to use as often and long as I feel the need. I could never respect a female. I don’t have *relationships* with girls. I have *activities* with girls – pure and simple.”

“I’m sorry, T.J. and I understand you can’t understand why I feel that way. But all that’s part of our non-life-together. What fascinating things have you been contemplating lately?”

They talked for the next half hour as if the previous conversation had never taken place. They respected each other at the intellectual and creative levels. They appreciated how they pushed each other – how they could disagree and yet never for a moment lose the respect that had grown between them. Few other people would ever understand that.

As they left to assemble in the band room with the others, T.J. turned to David and said: “You need to be prepared for a surprise later tonight.”

“Well, I guess if you’re going to insist, make her short, blond with dimples and plenty of experience.”

They exploded in laughter – the all-consuming, *have to sit down or roll on the floor holding your stomach*, sort of laughter only teen boys really understood.

* * *

The concert was going well. The audience – mostly parents, siblings and grandparents of the band members continued to show their appreciation with kind applause. Before the final number, Mr. Carter placed his baton on his music stand and turned to the audience and began speaking.

“Some time ago, several band members came to me and suggested that like other organizations associated with the school, the band should also single out one member for special recognition based on his or her over-all contribution that year. Since most of the others are awarded at the end of the school year, it was suggested ours should come at the end of first semester – during this season of love – so it might stand out.

“So, it is with great pleasure, I announce the presentation of the first annual Thomasville High School Band Achievement Award. In addition to musical skill, the recipient must have demonstrated dedication to the organization, a helpful disposition, and be a recognized leader within the band.”

He turned to the wings to the right of the stage and motioned. A member of the Beginners’ Band walked to the center of the stage and held out toward Mr. Carter what appeared to be a common hand saw with an inscription on it. David was confused. He was band president, but had not known about such goings on. More than that, it was his brother, Tommy, who was out there, saw in hand, with Mr. Carter.

Mr. Carter continued.

“The band members decided to use the symbol of the musical saw rather than the more traditional style of plaque. A commonplace item that can sing with the finest voices in our universe. That selection was partly to assume a sense of uniqueness in our award and partly because the first recipient just happens to be one of the few people who can make a saw sing like the voice of an angel.”

He turned to his left and straightened his arm.

“It is with more pleasure than anyone can imagine that I announce our first recipient – David Baker. Please come down here, son.”

David’s father stood and began clapping. Soon the rest of the audience had joined him.

David stood, puzzled. He handed his instrument to the boy next to him, and made his way to the center of the stage. His patented smile concealed his inner voice – ‘I *really* hate this!’

As David stopped beside him, Mr. Carter handed him the saw and spoke.

“I can think of nothing better to say than, Thank you, David. We all love you.”

The applause began, again. Mr. Carter motioned to the microphone as if David were expected to say something. The big room quieted. Fortunately, David’s mind *never* quieted.

“I am dumbfounded. I appreciate the good wishes that go with this.”

He held up the award that bore an inscription similar to the words Mr. Carter had spoken.

“I can honestly say I never saw it coming.”

Chuckles.

“By definition, a band is a group effort. Without any one of us here tonight the music would not have been the same – that one component would not have been available for you to enjoy – to complete our sound. What that says to me is that no one person can really be singled out, so I will gladly accept this in the names of all our band members – even him, I guess.”

He hitched his head toward Tommy.

More chuckles.

Tommy, being the ever-helpful little brother he was, stepped close to the mike and said, "I think he should play it, don't you?"

He began clapping, which led to more applause. David leaned in.

"I guess not this evening. I have no bow or rosin."

Tommy reached inside his pants and in dramatic/comedic fashion, slowly withdrew a bow, which had been secreted down the leg. He made it appear it was a painful and torturous activity. The audience roared. The first chair flute player stepped forward offering rosin. Another scooted a chair out for him to sit on.

"Still, folks," David continued, "A saw has to have a good accompanist to really make it work. I think not, but thank you."

His mother stood up out in the audience.

"What am I, son, chopped liver?"

The audience broke into laughter and offered more applause as she made her way forward to the piano at the right side of the stage.

David shrugged and took a seat. He bent the saw slightly into the necessary, gentle, 'S' shape and looked at his mother.

"Let's try, *Bless This House*."

His mother nodded and she turned to the audience, her hand along one side of her mouth.

"You know, if this one goes well, he's likely to just keep playing, applause or not."

Once quiet had returned, David bow-stroked the straight edge several times with his ear close, then spoke to his mother.

"I'm thinking the key of 'C' and we WILL talk about this later."

Chuckles.

They played. A saw has a high pitched, wonderfully full, reverberating sound – part violin, part bagpipe. David's rendition was flawless – of course. It was the only piece he would play that night – his decision. He returned the saw and bow for safe keeping to a beaming Tommy and returned to his seat – after all, they still had the big finish to play for the audience – *'Sleigh Ride'*, complete with a whip-yielding cowgirl – that had been David's idea. Mr. Carter had suggested a somewhat longer skirt from that which David had first envisioned.

When the curtain closed the bandmembers descended on him, offering thanks and congratulations. He mostly smiled and nodded, then just sat there as the others herded themselves off stage and moved on to whatever notable events were waiting to grace their lives that evening. The overhead lights fell dark. Finally, it was just David and T.J. sitting there on the semi-darkened stage. T.J. moved close to him and took a seat.

"A surprise, you said, huh?" David managed, suggesting displeasure.

"I couldn't say more. You understand that."

"Of course. I know."

"You hate it, don't you?"

"I will never admit that. It seems to mean too much to lots of other people. Something about gifts and gift givers."

"That was a funny line you said – you never saw it coming."

"One does what one can do."

David sighed, then continued.

"T.J. – don't offer me a beer tonight or I just might take you up on it."

"What's wrong? How can I help?"

"I have no idea what's wrong, which means I have no idea what you could do to help. I think the best plan is for me to get myself to bed and wait for tomorrow to take care of itself."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Boss of the School

The band room was empty and locked when David and T.J. arrived to put their instruments away. David had a key. He also had keys to the side door and the gym. He, also, understood that was unusual.

“You going to be okay, Dave? You seem really stressed out tonight.”

“I’ll be fine. Just a busy week. You may have noticed I tend to take on more than I should.”

“I have. THAT’s the first time you’ve ever indicated in my presence that you recognized it. I suppose that some days even Superman wishes people would just please take care of themselves.”

Smile met smile.

“You’re a good friend, T.J. I’ll be fine. This damn award just threw me. I’m a planner. I like to know what to expect. I don’t like surprises. It’s like this saw-thing is an *attack* on me instead of an *honor*.”

“That’s screwed up, man.”

David broke a big grin.

“Fortunately, a good night’s sleep usually unscrews me in good order.”

“I can stay if you want to talk more.”

“Sue will undoubtedly be waiting to walk me home. Like I said, I’ll be fine, but thanks.”

They donned their winter coats and exited the room – T.J. turned right, down the hall toward the main entrance and David, left toward a side door. There she was, sitting on the floor just inside the outer door. Sue was a steady and dependable aspect of David’s life. Sometimes he wondered if that were good – support – or bad – too much support. They would do anything for each other and he figured that was part of his private little world that demonstrated and proved to him how all human beings should interact with one another. Add in his family and J.T. and that included everybody of significance. He didn’t know if that were good or bad, either: Good, meaning he had his support group, or bad – sad, maybe – because *he* had one and he knew so many others didn’t.

He had often wondered if life would be better for him if he were dumber – less intelligent. He could see all the bad things that were just waiting to destroy humanity, which meant he could never really be happy or content deep down inside. He figured those who were less smart – those who couldn’t understand about those terrible social forces – must live much happier lives. He understood he had inborn talents and skills, which he should be able to use to keep those bad forces at bay – forces such as greed, self-interest, lack of concern for others’ wellbeing, and more. He believed talents brought responsibilities and therein lay the rub.

If she had been his sister, he’d have placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. With Sue, he didn’t feel comfortable doing that.

He gave her a hand up and opened the door, motioning her out ahead of him. He locked up behind them.

“Thanks for waiting.”

“You hate it, don’t you?”

“What?”

“The award.”

“Is this a conspiracy? My two best friends believe I hate the award.”

“That’s because we know you. I know how you hate surprises for one thing. I’m sure the idea of being rewarded for things you just believe are the right things for a good person to do, must really put a knot in your gut.”

“With that having been said, can we get on with life, please?” he said.

The wind had picked up and a light snow had begun to fall, setting a Christmas card scene between them and each street light as they approached. David reached out and pulled her close beside him as they walked. He didn't think twice about it. It was something you did for a friend in the cold. Sue understood his motivation, but wished it might be something more. They lived two blocks apart so went their separate ways at the corner of Cherry and Oak. David lingered in the shadows across the street to make sure she made it home without incident. Sue knew he would be watching but didn't acknowledge it. He would have hated that.

David took care of everybody. For him it wasn't out of *love*, necessarily -more out of what he believed was *right*. He wasn't sure he understood about love – he used the term but wasn't sure he really understood it. He spent more of his life on an intellectual plane than an emotional plane. He did feel emotions – joy, sadness, fear, disappointment, anxiety – perhaps a few others. He held his family and friends in a special kind of esteem – perhaps that was love. He really didn't understand. In the back of his mind, he had set aside the year he would be 19 to come to grips with love. More than likely it had been entered on his ten-year calendar – month, date, *and* time of day.

He figured there were several kinds of love – love of self, love of family, love of a mate or maybe even of a potential mate. He discounted as inappropriate, applying the concept of love to things like work, possessions, power, *awards*, and such. The term, 'like', applied better to them. His favorite ice cream was raspberry swirl. He liked it, not loved it. Although he believed love was strictly an interpersonal feeling-state, he allowed himself to cross that line when it came to Ralph – he believed he loved old Ralph. Sadly, that was the only love he really understood.

He realized that like most folks, in casual conversations he misused the terms hate and love – substituting them in situations where inside his head he meant dislike and like. He figured for most folks that presented genuine problems deep inside their minds, causing havoc with the confusion – perhaps marrying somebody they only liked because of it.

Friendship, he figured, always had to be a two-way arrangement – friends agreed to like each other. One couldn't say to himself, "Mike's my friend, but I know I'm not his friend." It had to be a two-way agreement. Love, however, David saw as one way – it was surely enhanced when it went both ways, but a person could say he loved Doris when he knew good and well she didn't love him. So, for David, Friendship – had to be two-way; Love – could be one way.

His family had learned to deal with David – well, mostly. When he entered through the kitchen door that night there was no big deal made over the award – they knew better. They understood he would hate it – well, 'dislike it intensely' within his conceptual framework. They also understood that sometimes he slipped and said 'hate' when he meant, 'dislike'. You had to understand David, not that many did – well, there was Ralph.

"I thought our impromptu musical offering went rather well this evening," his mother said as they traded kisses while she removed his hat and handed it to him.

"I suppose."

He slipped out of his coat and hung it in the entry closet. Tommy – less than subtle, Tommy – entered the room.

"Ma made cake this afternoon. Seems like this would be a good time – before bed – while we're all here together."

David managed a smile – his non-party was about to begin. Something his father had said earlier resurfaced for a second time that evening – that the feelings of the gift givers needed to be considered as well as those of the one receiving the gift. He tried to put his uncomfortable feelings aside and settle in to enjoy the time with his family – so they, in turn, could enjoy it. None of them, other than Tommy, could have pulled it off.

“Where you gonna hang up your Saw Thing?” Tommy asked.

David’s first response – the one that mercifully remained inside his head – was to suggest several interesting places he’d like to shove it, but instead he smiled.

“I thought I’d leave that up to you, sport. You have a good eye for things like that.”

“Really. I’ll get right to work thinking about it. Does it have to be in your room?”

“I leave that entirely up to you.”

His father entered from the outside, stomping, covered in snow, a package in hand. He lifted the bag.

“Ice cream for any who might want some. Been a long time since dinner.”

He had no way of knowing the cat was already out of the bag so was doing his part to continue the charade.

Tommy took control of the package and removed the container.

“It’s cold.”

“Imagine that,” his sister said as she entered the kitchen. “Ice cream being cold. Our family seems to have *two* geniuses.”

She turned to David.

“Nice sawing tonight, brother.”

She planted a kiss on his temple. David resisted the urge to rub it off – well, not the idea of the kiss. He just had an aversion to damp sideburns.

“Aren’t you going to ask what kind of ice cream it is?” Tommy asked.

David glanced around the room at the others and offered them a smile and wink.

“Well, let’s see? I’m thinking – *Road Kill with Chocolate Sprinkles.*”

“No.”

Uncontrollable giggles set in.

“Well then, I guess I have to give up. I was so sure I was going to be right.”

“It’s raspberry swirl,” Tommy offered regaining control of himself.

“Fortunately, that happens to be my favorite. One might think all this had been pulled together just for me, or something.”

Their mother clapped a hand over Tommy’s mouth before he could respond. Whatever it was going to be would have undoubtedly been inappropriate – *honest*, but inappropriate.

The conversation flowed smoothly, like it almost always did within that family. Although David appreciated it, his head went immediately to all the kids who didn’t have families where conversation went so well and where there was no money for spur of the moment celebrations. He allowed himself to be bothered by such things.

It was going on ten before they moved upstairs to their bedrooms. Although Tommy said nothing about it, they all understood that he figured he’d just pulled a fast one – getting to stay up past nine. They all, also, understood he’d be a bear to get up in the morning. They wondered if ‘the bomb’ ever put those two things together. No one would ask.

David stripped for bed and pulled the covers back. Ralph, who had slept through the non-party, pushed the door open and ambled into the room. David sat beside him on the rug and rubbed and stroked him in all his favorite places.

“Life’s tough, just now, old friend. I wouldn’t burden you with it, but you’re the only one I feel comfortable talking with. T.J. and Sue would just get upset and feel bad. That’s not my style. And my parents, I’d never do anything to distress them. I figure everybody has their own burdens to bear – no reason for me to make it more difficult for them. I’m the smart one – well, you and me – we’ll handle this.”

Ralph inched closer and repositioned his chin up onto David’s lap.

“I may have taken on too much. When I was younger, I took on lots, also, but lots at age ten or twelve is a whole lot different in magnitude or importance than lots at seventeen. What do you think?”

Ralph lifted his head and looked directly into David’s eyes. He blinked. David blinked back and broke a prolonged grin.

“I knew you’d understand. You’ve always understood me. You know, you’ve never told me why you picked me out of all the other people to follow home from downtown that day. I’m not complaining. Really glad you did. I’ve just sometimes wondered if I give off some sort of pheromone or aroma that says, “Hey, all you lost souls, come follow me. I can fix things for you.” I feel really good that I seem to have been able to fix things for you – I suppose that’s been a two-way street, hasn’t it? He leaned down and they rubbed noses.

“If life is this hectic now, what will it be like in my future? I can see it now. My wife says she wants to have a baby. I check my calendar and tell her the earliest I can pencil her in will be a month from next Tuesday.

“That reminds me, I wonder what T.J. is doing tonight. I really get the idea he is drinking less since we’ve become friends. That pleases me. I guess I’m not sure why. It just seems such a shame for him to pickle his wonderful brain every night. I recognize that he and I share many of the same quandaries about life, but where I wonder and worry about them, he puts himself into a stupor so he doesn’t have to think. No thinking, less anxiety about them, I suppose. Who can say which one of us really has the better handle on things?

“I doubt if I have had any effect on his romantic life – no, *romantic* is definitely not the right word – his animalistic sex life, pure and simple hits it better. We only spoke of it in depth one time after that first meeting. I’m not sure why we’ve never revisited it. He knows the topic doesn’t make me uncomfortable so it must make him uncomfortable. Hmm? How he describes – what shall I call it, *passion*, I suppose – is, for him at least, a force that just suddenly takes hold of one, becoming more powerfully controlling than any counter measures the mind can assemble against it, although it seems he really doesn’t try. That may be why I shy away from dating or getting serious with anybody. Few things are more disturbing to me than feeling I’m not in control. Maybe most guys can control their passion; maybe T.J. is just one of a few who cannot or, more likely, doesn’t want to; maybe this is the most useless conversation you and I have ever had, Ralph.

“I must say I have not yet found any necessary connection between sex and love – either logical or evolutionary. When I pressed dad about it during one of our growing up talks he admitted that sexual relations were based on fun more than anything else, although he said he’d never want to play that very special game with anybody but his wife. I remember at ten, that turned my stomach for a week! Looking at it right now, I’m thinking that must somehow relate to love.

“I’m all for sexual feelings, Ralph, don’t get me wrong. They represent the most fantastic physical sensations a person – at least a guy – can have. I just need to be in full control of them. Although I’ve never pictured it this way, that makes me a very greedy and self-centered person – me, needing to be in control of everything. Why should it surprise me? That’s disturbing.”

He took Ralph’s head in his hands and gently shook it side to side.

“Why didn’t you stop me before I got to that revelation?”

David stood up.

“You sleeping up on the bed or here on the floor tonight?”

Ralph raised his head as if considering the offer, then lay his chin back on the rug and closed his old eyes.

David closed the door, turned off the light and crawled under the covers. Momentarily, the coolness of the sheets felt good against his skin, but he knew that would soon give way to the warmth he needed as the world outside grew cold and dark.

* * *

David had called a 7:30 a.m. meeting of all the committee chairmen for the Winter Dance. They met in the gym and examined their progress. Things were ahead of schedule and David appropriately spread the credit around.

“We hear you got Hilliard and Principle Hays to agree to – how shall I phrase it – a low level of illumination. How did you accomplish that?” one boy asked.

“I merely announced to them that if they didn’t agree to my demand, I’d tell the whole school about their secret romance.”

“Really?” one girl asked.

“Of course, not. Sometimes I joke around.”

“Sometimes?” came a voice from the back.

Chuckles made their way across the group.

“Actually – and you must swear yourselves to secrecy – I brought them in here in the dark and, to buy time, made it appear I was having trouble getting the switch to work – the one that lit the moon. That gave their eyes time to fully adjust to the darkness, so when I suddenly turned the moon on full bright, it appeared to be more than enough light.”

A smattering of applause circulated.

“He really is an evil genius,” somebody called out.

More chuckles.

Each committee made a list of those things left for them to do, and at David’s insistence, added a date and time by which each would be completed. Time was running short.

“There’s a rumor you aren’t coming, Dave.”

“Rumors!” he replied. “Back in September I *heard* a rumor that the Democratic Party had nominated me to be their candidate for mayor. Oh, no, I guess I *started* that rumor.”

He had handled the question without having had to answer it. The small group dispersed with smiles and chuckles.

T.J. came up to David. He was on the entertainment committee – one that hadn’t had anything to do since David and Sue had handled it.

“So, E.G., looks like you’re about to pull off another grand success.”

“E.G.?” David asked looking puzzled.

“Evil Genius. I’m starting a campaign for us to all call you that from now on.”

“Well, I can’t deny the second part – test scores and all – and more and more I’m beginning to believe the first part as well.”

“Your dark side is still showing this morning. I’m gonna bet you didn’t sleep well enough last night to get yourself unscrewed.”

“I’m fine. Why don’t you go sit in on beginners band this morning? They like having their role models join in with them.”

“I’m *nobody’s* role model. Let’s *get* that straight and *keep* that straight.”

His voice had been stern; his tone serious. The idea clearly had upset him.

“I won’t argue the point, but just ask you to give it some honest thought. How about getting together at my place about eight tonight – after church choir practice?”

“I’ll probably either be intimately occupied or a good deal less than sober by then. Maybe over the weekend.”

All quite unexpectedly, ever composed, stoic, David Baker felt a tear run down his cheek. T.J. had to have seen it, but turned and left not about to discuss it or stand there obviously trying to ignore it.

David brushed it away wondering what was going on inside him. He only shed tears when he was alone – or with Ralph. Maybe T.J. was right. Maybe he was screwed up.

At the end of first period, Mr. Williams turned toward David.

“It has been a pleasure to have you grace us with your presence for the entire period, Mr. Baker.”

David felt uncomfortable. Usually it would have caused no more than a smile as he hurried off to take care of something between classes. That day, he made his way to the boys’ restroom and closed himself inside a stall just to be by himself for three minutes. He needed something, but he had no idea what. He couldn’t be sure if he were more upset about his puzzling mental state or the fact that he was allowing himself to be upset about it. He never allowed such things.

By noon he was feeling better – meaning more like the David he had taught himself to be. He arrived for lunch almost on time and was interested to see Jake, the new kid, was sitting across the table from Sue.

“That is spectacular,” he said to himself.

He slid in beside Sue and nodded at the newcomer.

“You’re early today,” she said. How nice.”

“Everybody’s doing their part. Now I get to just sit back and watch things come together.”

“May I ask what things?” Jake asked, looking at Sue.

She answered.

David's chairman of the Winter Dance. It traditionally falls on the shoulders of the President of the Junior class.

"That's David?"

"I'm over here, guys," David said. "It's legal for the two of you to include me in your conversation, especially when it's about me."

He tried to offer it humorously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've never been in a position to speak with the boss of a school before. I guess I didn't know the rules."

"Boss of the school? Where'd you get that idea?"

Sue just sat back to watch and listen. She figured it was time David got an earful from an apparently honest newcomer.

"Well, it's what everybody says – maybe not using those words, but when I ask things like, 'who should I see if I want to . . .' or 'how should I go about . . .' or 'who could point me toward some kids who also like . . .', everybody says 'Dave'. It seems *you* are that Dave."

"Oh. I see. Well, sometimes kids overstate things, you know."

"I do know, but I was reading through the student handbook. You are president of seven organizations plus your class, you're vice-president of the student council – it says the president has to be a senior – and you've won about every award the school and community gives to students. Word is that you also routinely undersell yourself and your importance. When you came and asked me to join you on my first noon here, I figured you were somebody special. Thanks for that, by the way. I was feeling quite alone and even a little scared, I guess. Dad, my younger brother and I are just starting out on our own after Ma left us. I couldn't believe it when you called the other night to check on me and then later to ask if my little brother would like to go camping. He will by the way so you'll need to tell me what, where, when and so on."

"Sleeping bag, canteen or water bottle, Methodist church at 5 p.m. I'll have Joey meet you. He's a great kid. Be easy for your brother to spot because he's a bit super-sized and typically wears coveralls."

“See, the boss of everything.”

“I guess the only important thing is to hear you are feeling more a part of us now. I’m really happy to hear that. Next time we get a new student, I’m going to put you on his case first thing.”

Jake nodded.

“I’d be honored.”

He was finished and excused himself. Sue just raised her eyebrows and looked at David.

“What? You think he made some point you haven’t been able to make and I should take it as some special message.”

“Do I, now?”

David remained quiet for several moments while he poked at the food on his tray. He looked at Sue.

“I guess I *am* what he said – bossy.”

“He didn’t say *bossy*, he said *boss*, like the guy who makes things run smoothly – sees that everybody is included.”

“By any other description – bossy. I just don’t seem to be able to keep from it. I’m a terrible person – having to be in control of everything. It’s just me and a pack of teen age lemmings in this building. They’d follow me right over the cliff if I were to jump. I don’t give anybody else a chance to be a leader. I know all that about me, but I don’t know how to be anybody *but* me. Maybe I’m a bad influence on the other kids – undoubtedly, I am. Tell the principal’s secretary I’m sick and went home. Will you do that for me?”

“I will, but I don’t like the idea.”

“Right. Here, I’ll write a note if you’ll deliver it. I should never have asked you to lie for me. I just need some time to think it all through and shake things back into place. I’ll see you at choir practice this evening. Don’t worry. I’ve been like this before – just more private about it. Things always work out. I’m here as living proof of that.”

Sue thought that last comment was odd, but didn’t dwell on it.

David left, leaving the tray for Sue to tend to. That was always *his* thing, tending to their trays. Sue was concerned. She’d see how he was at choir before deciding if she needed to do something.

David had three errands to complete there at school before he left for home. His mother was working until five that afternoon so he would have the house to himself until Tommy got home. Maybe he'd walk the woods for a while – that always seemed to clear his head.

He headed home.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Friend Trying to be a Friend

Nobody but businesses locked doors in Thomasville. David entered through the kitchen, poured a glass of milk and made his way upstairs. Ralph was asleep by the fireplace in the living room so he didn't disturb him.

"What the?" he said when he came to his door.

There was a hand-written note taped to it.

DO NOT ENTER UNLESS YOU ARE WILLING TO TALK!!!

He removed it, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. Laying on his bed, reading Hayakawa, was T.J.

"You're supposed to be in school, T.J."

"So are you."

"No, I signed out sick."

"I signed out sick, also. If one of us hadn't been *you*, the secretary might have got suspicious. Sick, after lunch, both having eaten the same food in the cafeteria, you get the idea."

"Sue got to you!"

"She'd really rather get to you, you know."

"Ridiculous. We've been best friends for years."

T.J. shrugged – remaining prone on David's bed.

"Why are you here? No, I know why you're here. Let me rephrase that. I came home to be alone. I'd rather you weren't here."

"No, you wouldn't. Something has either busted inside that super-charged brain of yours or it's about to. I'm thinking *Dr. T.J.* needs to open it up and look inside."

"That paints a gruesome picture."

"Thank you. I aim to please."

He sat up and laid the book on the night stand, then scooted to the head of the bed and patted the area beside him.

David lowered his backpack to the floor and slipped out of his shoes. T.J.s were already off. He had been there before and new the routine. He fully understood *that* was not the time to break David's rules – about shoes, anyway. With some reluctance, David sat, cross-legged at the end of the bed, facing his friend. T.J. spoke.

“So, boss-man, how goes it?”

“My first reaction is to punch you in the face for calling me that.”

“That might not be a bad starting place. Take your best shot.”

He held up his chin and leaned forward.

“You know I don't hit people.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Moving on,” David said ignoring the suggestion.

“Because of you I had a very unusual night, Dave.”

“Oh?”

“I sent Beth away as soon as she arrived. I sucked on Coke instead of . . . well. Upshot was, I had to lay there all alone and completely sober thinking about you – worrying about you.”

“Good for me, I suppose,” David said.

He made his point, but T.J. ignored it, continuing.

“I have to say my body felt great this morning. My brain still feels lousy – the thinking part, I mean. I'm worried about you. Sue's worried about you. I'm guessing you're worried about you, too.”

“That right?”

“*That's right!*”

“It's my job to worry about people not people's job to worry about me.”

“And who bestowed that job – that responsibility – on you?”

“I suppose I did.”

“That's a relief.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you'd have said God, I was ready to call the men in the white coats – the ones with straightjackets and padded rooms.”

“Won’t be necessary. *That* should pose an uncomfortable alternative for you.”

“Now, *I* don’t understand *you*, Dave. Uncomfortable?”

“If I’d have been dragged off to the nut house I’d be somebody else’s responsibility, but here I am, all yours.”

“Strange as it might seem to you, I’m glad of that. I’m your friend. I want to help, whatever that means. Sue, too, of course. What can we do – take on some of your responsibilities – bind you to Tommy’s wagon and cart you off to a shrink – talk – what?”

“You forgot one excellent option – *leave me alone!*”

“This is me, Dave. That will not be an option and you know that so let’s get on with it.”

“Okay then, how about taking me into the woods and getting me falling down drunk.”

“That would be no challenge. After one can of beer you’d be zonkered.”

“You think, really?”

“I know, really? Have you even ever tasted alcohol?”

“No. I’ve smelled it on you often enough to be at least partially immunized against it, I’m thinking.”

“You have?”

“Of course, I have.”

“Sorry about that. I really am. Anyway, an occasional sniff doesn’t count.”

“You really didn’t drink last night?”

“Cross my heart.”

“That is so great.”

“We are here to talk about you. You’re intentionally trying to change the focus.”

“Maybe it’s what I do, but still, it makes me very happy – what you said about last night. Why don’t you stay here with me tonight and go for two in a row?”

“If you behave yourself and get to work on things that mean something, maybe I’ll consider it.”

“Really. Okay then. What I won’t do for a good friend.”

They exchanged weak smiles.

“There’s milk in the frig if you imbibe,” David said.

T.J. shook his head and once more tried to get back on topic.

“So, are you just overloaded, or what?”

“I’m not sure and that in itself really bothers me. I’m no busier than I always am. Probably be less busy than usual these next few weeks since I don’t have to take semester tests.”

“Semester tests coming up, are they?”

David ignored it, understanding it had been an attempt at humor. T.J. continued.

“Well, when teen guys have problems it’s usually either girls, sports, parents or school – he held up four fingers one at a time, enumerating as he spoke. I assume we can mark off sports since you only run cross-country and that’s over for the year – Mr. District Gold Medalist. Nobody in the history of teenagers has ever had better parents than you have, so that can’t be it. It can’t be school work unless your ticked off because there aren’t grades higher than ‘A’ *pluses* you can strive for. Frankly, I have no idea where you stand on the subject of girls. I mean I know you respect them. I’m really not sure you like them, romantically, I mean. Hell, I don’t care if you do or not, but sometimes it would help if I knew.”

David remained quiet, clearly not prepared to talk about it. Then he spoke.

“So, if it isn’t any of those usual things, what’s left?”

“What’s left is your damn proclivity to need to run the world.”

David smiled.

“I wonder if the word ‘damn’ has ever before in the history of the English language been use as an adjective modifying ‘proclivity’ – a tendency?”

“See. Right there! That’s part of your problem. You don’t think like the rest of us think and because we don’t think like you, I think you believe we are all less worthy than you are. And I’ll take it a step further; since you don’t have all the answers to the big questions humanity has to solve, you believe the rest of us most certainly never will be able to find them. In other words, you believe humanity is doomed unless *you* can find the elusive answers. And, right now, you have huge doubts about your ability to do that.”

“Wow. Why don’t you come right out and say what’s on your mind, kid?”

They each managed a smile. T.J. had clearly worked himself into a lather. David had never seen him that forceful or animated during conversation. He usually was the dictionary definition of, 'Mr. Cool'."

"You okay, buddy?" David asked.

"Of course, I am. Sometimes when I don't have 90 proof swimming around in my blood I lose control. I hate that. Sorry."

"Maybe we have come to a partial solution."

"What's that?" T.J. asked, puzzled.

"When I get upset *I'll* begin punching people out and when you get upset *you* can begin drinking – oh, no, I think you just said that's already what you do."

"This is supposed to be about you, Dave."

"It might be better if we made it about *us* – being friends and all."

T.J. looked out the window beyond the bed and grew quiet.

David remained quiet as well, studying his friend's face really for the first time ever. Just then it appeared older and more weathered than seemed appropriate for a boy his age. He usually had that classic laid back look most teen boys tried to achieve. At that moment it was gone, replaced by taut skin under his chin and across his cheeks and forehead. He was sincerely trying to help him, but if this was what it did to others who tried to help him, David just couldn't allow it. If he believed one thing for certain about himself, it was that he had not been placed on Earth to be a hardship on anybody.

"We both seem tired," David said. "Maybe we need to rest awhile before we get back at it. I really do appreciate what you're trying to do."

He lay back and unfolded his legs so his feet were along the side of the bed up near T.J.

"Maybe. I told you I didn't sleep much last night. Say a half hour?"

David nodded. T.J. also unfolded himself and scooted down onto the opposite side of the bed. He tossed one of the pillows to his friend. Within a very few minutes they were asleep.

Two o'clock came – they slept on. Three o'clock came – they slept on.

“That’s the dumbest thing I even seen.”

It was Tommy’s voice as he stood in the open doorway to David’s room. He was home from school. It was one of those rare times he was allowed to be at home by himself. Apparently, having the two older boys there had interfered with his plans. Older brother’s rooms were always intriguing to younger brothers. His afternoon of exploration had been interrupted before it had begun.

The older boys stretched themselves awake and looked at the time, surprised.

“What’s up with you two? Sick?” Tommy asked moving in closer to them.

“Just tired, little bro. Skedaddle now. Megan should be home soon. You can go invade her space for a while.”

“I thought we’d hang up your saw-thing after school,” Tommy said.

“How about right after dinner? I promise.”

“Okay. I have three exquisite ideas.”

“I’ll be enthusiastically eager to hear about your exquisite ideas – after dinner.”

Tommy left, more or less satisfied. The older boys sat up, legs over the side.

“Guess we were tireder that we knew,” T.J. said. “Is tireder a word?”

“I understood it so I suppose so. I need to go down to the kitchen. Mom may have left a note about things she wants me to do to help get dinner started. Bound to be leftover cake if you have the munchies.”

There was no note so they filled glasses with milk and made off with the remaining cake back up to David’s room.

“I feel a lot better,” David said as they returned to their former perches on the bed.

“I guess I do, too. Strange. Never really tackled personal stuff like that with anybody before.”

“And still, as an admitted amateur, you were ready to come and turn my head upside down?”

“It was like one of those snow globes that you turn over and snow begins to swirl around the little kids huddled together under the umbrella.”

“How in the world was it like that?”

“We were like the kids hiding under the umbrella with hundreds of things swirling around us – questions, ideas, random thoughts, stabs in the dark. . . they were all just out of our grasp, but never really left us. They were playful, like they were teasing us, but in reality, they were serious, troublesome problems we needed to solve.”

“That was sort of beautiful – the way you put those words together. Do you write?”

“A, B, C, D, . . .”

“Not what I meant, doofus. Me thinks ye is hidin’ somethin’, laddy.”

“You ever talk like a pirate, Long John?”

“Seriously, so?”

“I’ve written some stuff.”

“Stuff?” David asked, clearly interested.

“Stories, poems – maybe verses I never know how to tell the difference.”

“I’d never considered the difference. Maybe poems are classier – you think?”

“Sounds right.”

“What other hidden talents do you have?”

“On my thirteenth birthday, I downed a six-pack in under five minutes – a gift from my dad – he clapped. It was the only time I ever remember him saying he was proud of me – but I assume that doesn’t fit the category of your inquiry.”

“You are correct. Sing?”

“Command or question?”

“Question.”

“I’m a shower baritone – never anywhere else.”

“Why don’t you come to choir practice tonight? No pressure to sing if you don’t want to.”

“I probably should be going.”

“I thought we had deal – like a couple of eight year olds on a sleepover.”

“Probably not a good idea.”

“Can’t make it two nights in a row without hooch?”

“Maybe, something like that.”

“What signals do you get that tell you that?”

“For one thing, I want to punch you out for trying to convince me to stay the night.”

“That’s a pretty strong signal, I suppose.”

T.J. began slipping back into his shoes.

“You have a really nice place here, Dave. Thanks for not getting upset with me for coming uninvited like I did.”

“Who said I wasn’t upset? We’re the, ‘*Never Show Our Feeling Twins*’, remember. Your Brother, *Get-Drunk*, and I’m Brother, *Go-Nuts*.”

“Talk about inventive word choices.”

“Why don’t you at least stay for dinner. Mom loves having extras. I’ve seen her stretch lunch for three into a feast for seven. You can call your dad.”

“He won’t be expecting me. Our paths seldom cross except in the morning.”

David didn’t press for a further explanation. T.J. offered it, anyway.

“What if I explode over some little thing? You know I do that.”

“My family is the original expert when it comes to dealing with a teen boy that explodes at little things.”

“You? I don’t believe it? Calm, cool, always in control David, the boss of the school?”

Suddenly uncomfortable with what he had revealed, David reverted to being a ten year old and threw a playful punch into his friend’s shoulder. They had never tussled with each other. That was about to come to an end. T.J. responded immediately and had David on the floor spread eagle on his stomach, beginning to draw his arms up toward his shoulder blades. David flipped them over and was soon straddling T.J., sitting on his chest with his arms above his head, held flat against the floor.

It went back and forth for ten minutes. In the end, their laughter sapped their strength and they rolled apart on the floor.

“Well, that was something new,” David said.

“I’m disappointed. Surely that massive head of yours can come up with something better than, ‘well, that was something new’.”

They lay there breathing hard and smiling, each finding it difficult to believe what they had just done. Interestingly, they both had to admit they felt better. About what, they could not say.

T.J. turned his head and looked at David.

“You’re not as strong as I am,” he said.

“I don’t know, I think I was on top as often as you were.”

“That’s true, but it’s because you’re a *smarter* fighter than I am – not a *stronger* fighter.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Of course, not. I’ve *never* seen you do anything just spontaneously like that. You always have to think it through. It often seems like there isn’t any *you* – there’s just what you decide to make yourself into at the moment. You *think* way too much, Dave.”

“And, in this moment of mutual honesty, may I say the opposite about you. The *last* thing you consider is how what you are about to do might affect you and others in the long term. You live your life in the whatever-feels-good-moment. You seem to have been on one reckless dash through life ever since I first knew you existed. Frankly, I’m surprised you have survived seventeen years, the irresponsible way you have lived them.”

“And you, my friend, are going to wake up dead some morning never having really *ever* enjoyed the fun side of life – having missed out on that wonderful part of being human. Which is really worse? My way or your way?”

“Interesting. Thank you,” David said struggling to his feet.

For David, the best defense was always introducing another topic.

“So, you doing dinner and choir and sleep over – any or all?”

“I guess I can spare the time. Maybe, if you watch me, you can see how life can be fun.”

“I think you underestimate me, but I’m always open to learning new things.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Their talk had lasted longer than they realized. Tommy appeared at the door.

“Mom says she hopes you’ll stay for supper, T.J. – pot roast with those little tiny carrots and red potatoes. She opened the pot so I could smell it. Mom’s is the best. I already told her you’d stay.”

“Thank you. I’ll be happy to stay.”

“Wash up, then. Me and Dave share a bathroom – that door. I’m already, ready.”

He showed his hands – front and back. The boys didn’t mention the smudges on his cheeks. It seemed David still needed to show the boy how to incorporate a mirror into his life.

* * *

“That was a fine meal, Mrs. Baker. Dave and I’ll do the dishes.”

“I’ll help,” Megan said, clearly hoping for some close to handsome T.J. time.

“Naw. This will be a guy thing, but thanks,” David said totally oblivious to her underlying motive. BOYS!

“My, David, you must bring this young man by more often,” Mrs. Baker said. “There will be dessert after choir practice if you’re still around.”

“Sounds great. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” Mr. Baker said, thinking that nothing about the boy – his sense of humor, his good manners, his apparently sincere desire to help – fit anything he thought he knew about T.J. He looked at his wife and shrugged.

They left, leaving the two boys to clear the table, do the dishes and leave the floor wet as a kiddie wading pool. For some reason that seemed hilarious as they mopped *it* – *and* each other’s stocking feet.

“We’ll meet up with you at church,” David called to his parents as the boys raced up the stairs, pushing and shoving to gain some advantage.

“First on our agenda – dry sox,” David said.

“Dry sox over wet feet?” T.J. asked.

“Amend that. First on our agenda, feet drying, then dry sox.”

Down stairs:

Mrs. Baker looked at her husband.

“Our David, running up the stairs, with a friend, when he was NOT in a snit, in wet sox, and laughing about it. What’s got into him?”

“A small slice of his friend,” Mr. Baker said, “and, I think I like it.”

Upstairs:

“See. That’s how a guy has fun,” T.J. said.

“I understand that, and although it was enjoyable, part of me says it was just frivolous and undignified.”

“Exactly. You just defined, ‘fun’.”

“It makes me uneasy from one end to the other.”

“I’m betting it could become a better feeling with practice.”

David did not respond. He tossed his friend a towel and a fresh, balled-up pair of socks, taking a pair from the drawer for himself. They sat beside each other on the edge of the bed as they made themselves dry-foot-in-fresh-sox ready for the evening.

“You know what would be hilarious?” T.J. said holding up one sock.

“Well, yes, actually I can think of several things that would be hilarious.”

“Shut up and listen. You know that sign on the door to the city building – the one that says, ‘Shirt and shoes required beyond this point’?”

“Yeah. For summer, I assume. Tell me when we get to the hilarious part.”

“I’m thinking it would be – *hilarious* – to show up *just* wearing a shirt and shoes and see what would happen – I would have obeyed the sign, exactly.”

“And broken the public nudity law.”

“Then I’ll go to Canada where there aren’t laws against public nudity and do it there.”

“I suppose there is an element of absurdity in that – humorous in that way.”

“You come with me?”

“To Canada? Of course. We’ll leave right after choir practice. Apparently, there’ll be no need to pack a bag.”

“You’re not taking me seriously.”

“You’re right, I’m not.”

“You wouldn’t ever do something like that, would you?”

T.J. asked.

“Of course, I would, for the right pay off.”

“Like ten thousand dollars wired into your bank account, you mean?”

“No. But maybe for ten thousand dollars wired into the local Youth Service Bureau’s account or the building fund for the new children’s hospital wing.”

“So, how about nine a.m. on June fifteenth?”

“What? I think you skipped a step or seven.”

“Like what?”

“I think it calls for somebody to offer the money – make the bet, finance the absurd stunt.”

“Oh, yeah. I got maybe a hundred bucks put back. You?”

“You are an idiot, T.J. – a loveable idiot, but an idiot nonetheless.”

“So,” T.J. began. “Wasn’t this exchange we just had enjoyable for you – fun?”

“Let’s see, how did you define fun: frivolous and undignified? I guess it meets both requirements, but if that’s fun, I’m not particularly in favor of it – for me.”

“I hear you laughing at funny things kids say at school. How was this any different?”

“A laugh can be a genuine response to something humorous or it can be for the purpose of lending support to somebody who needs it.”

“Well, what about when *you* joke around with the kids and teachers. You’re always making them laugh. We all think of you as the school’s laugh machine.”

“It has been my observation that laughing people are relaxed, happy people and that relaxed, happy people do better in a learning environment. It doesn’t work that way for me, but it seems to for most folks.”

“*David, whatever-your-middle-name-is, Baker, you suck all the enjoyment out of life. I give up.*”

“You probably don’t really give up. I sincerely believe I’ll have to find ways of putting up with this for the rest of our days together.”

It was worth a smile on David’s part.

Things remained quiet between them for several moments while they tied their shoes. Then, T.J. spoke.

“Do you really believe the things you’ve said in the last ten minutes?”

“Truthfully? I have no idea, but it proved to be a useful exercise in thinking about something I clearly need to think about. Thanks.”

“I just don’t get you, Dave.”

“Few people ever have – least of all me. Race you to the church.”

CHAPTER SIX

Serious Blows Were Thrown Back and Forth

It turned out that T.J. had a fine voice. David received the impression he had enjoyed the rehearsal. He picked up the process of reading vocal notes remarkably fast. But then, T.J. was a smart kid. It was an easy transition from his instrument.

“So,” David said as they started the walk home through the snow, “how about making this a regular gig – singing in the choir?”

“I acknowledge the kindness of your offer, kind sir, but will have to decline.”

“Why?”

“I’m not a Methodist.”

“I’m probably not a Methodist either, but the choices are limited here in Thomasville – Methodist, Baptist #1, Baptist #2, or Nazarene.”

“What do you mean, you’re probably *not*?”

“*Probably* means an inexact possibility tending toward yes or no, and *not* means no, unlikely, never, *nada*.”

“You’re not helping.”

“How about this, then. I am not nearly finished with my examination of religion and religions so I do the Methodist thing because it is expected by my family until such a time as I get it all figured out. I find most Methodists to be fine people, I like to sing in their choir, Reverend Coffelt generously listens to me ramble on about things when I need an ear – often steering my thoughts in useful new directions. He says from his observation, I seem to be more a Buddhist/Humanist combo, than anything else.”

“Is that even possible?” T.J. asked.

“It seems to be for me, I guess. What I take from it is that I and they respect altruism, knowledge, the welfare of human beings, wisdom, and moderation. They don’t talk about sin or hell. Instead they stress good and compassion and helpfulness. They believe it is better to be motivated by doing what is good and right rather than from fear of being punished. They believe it is inappropriate to do anything to intentionally harm your own body.”

“Guess that last one leaves me out then,” T.J. said.

“Smoking and alcohol, you mean?”

“See how obvious it is!”

“You and I are probably both too selfish to be good Buddhists anyway.”

“In most ways that I can see, you’re the most unselfish person I’ve ever met, Dave.”

“You are making that judgement based on my veneer – the outside part that shows. I want to live in the finest world possible. The only way to have that is to make sure its residents are happy, well cared for, productive, altruistic and compassionate. When I do things to guide people toward cultivating those traits, I’m really not trying to help them, I’m trying to set the stage for a perfect world for me to live in.”

T.J. chuckled.

“What?”

“I was just wondering if that was the first time in your life you ever ended a sentence with a preposition – *for me to live in.*”

“You wonder about strange things – things so meaningless as to protect yourself from thinking about important stuff.”

“Like?”

“Like why, right now at this moment, you are really wondering how you are going to get a drink.”

“Wow! Mind reader?”

“No, you are fidgeting and wiping at your mouth with the back of your hand. I’d much rather you were thinking about *why* you need a drink and what to do, so you don’t. I know that you know it’s killing you, one internal organ at a time.”

“Oh, I know *why*. Genes. Dad’s an alcoholic. Mom died from alcohol poisoning soon after I was born – she hadn’t wanted to get pregnant. I’m fated to end up in the gutter alongside them.”

“I don’t believe that – that you have to be doomed. I’m sorry, by the way. I didn’t know about your parents.”

“And I am counting on you to keep your pie hole shut about it.”

“Of course. Let’s make a deal, I’ll tell you something uncomfortable about me so we’ll be even in the secret keeping department.”

“You don’t have to. I trust you. I mean if I can’t trust David *Somebody* Baker, boss of the world, who can I trust?”

“Since you seem to be so obsessed about my middle name, you could just ask. Better still, and this counts as *my* secret – it’s *Philpott* – my mother’s maiden name. Now you happy?”

“From what I can tell neither of us is happy.”

They walked on most of the block in silence.

“I never said I wasn’t happy,” David said at last. “I mean, I have a great family, I love learning and do well in school, I have at least one physical skill I’m proud of – cross country endurance and speed – I have two good friends – you and Sue – I seem to be well liked, I pretty well get to run my world the way I want it. What makes you think I’m not happy?”

“You never talk like a happy person. When you make people laugh, for instance, you say to yourself, ‘well, that worked well. I affected them. I won again.’”

“Hmm. Interesting. And you say that’s not being happy.”

“That’s what I say. You always have to win. Fortunately, with that gigantic brain of yours, you almost always do win. If you ever didn’t, I can’t imagine how you would react. I think your reason for living would probably be gone.”

“You tend to get overly dramatic.”

“Maybe that’s why I drink – to keep my head on a non-overly-dramatic course.”

“You drink as an excuse not to face your other problems.”

“Says the king of the world?”

“So, you staying at my place tonight or not?”

“In answer to your blatantly diversionary question, I think I’ll take a rain check, as is said.”

“A booze check more likely, which reminds me of something I’ve been meaning to ask you. The past two weeks you haven’t stunk like cigarette smoke – a very pleasant change, I might add. You discover some new, smell-like-a-teen-boy Febreze aroma you drench yourself in before school?”

T.J. touched his upper right arm.

“I’m trying a nicotine patch. It’s all your fault. A bad influence on me. I suspect Phillip Morris is already having you investigated – probably a hit out on you, even.”

“I see. Good for you. *Good for me.*”

“See, that’s totally the wrong response. My message ended in a joke. That’s what a normal person would react to first – maybe not a belly laugh, but at least a smile and maybe a chuckle, but you go right to congratulating yourself because you won, again. For the past four months, I’ve been trying to show you everything’s not about you, but I can see I’ve made no headway, whatsoever.”

“*T.J. Jackson* has consciously been trying to work a plan – on me – Really?”

“And since something was *my* plan and not yours, your comeback is to put me down – ‘gee, T.J., I thought you was too dumb to have plans’.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Yes, it *is* what you meant although you will continue to refuse to recognize it. My head can’t take any more of this tonight. Let’s just leave it at the fact that you have arranged your world so everybody loves David, everybody thinks David is the greatest, everybody depends on David, everybody wants their little boy to grow up and be just like David. None of those things could ever apply to me. I’m cutting out. Thank your mom again for dinner. Tommy’s right, it is the best pot roast I’ve ever had. And you’re welcome for my blunt and honest assessment of the best friend I’ve ever had. See you at school tomorrow. I’ll return your sox after I get a chance to wash them.”

David's first impulse was to hogtie the boy and chain him to his bed so he couldn't get away. He was heading for the nearest bottle and David felt responsible. David didn't like feeling responsible for things he couldn't fix.

When he got home the rest of his family was already there. The younger ones were tattling and pointing fingers over some dispute that arose while the others were gone. David kissed his mother and headed right for the stairs.

"There's ice cream left from last night, Dave," Tommy called after him.

"You can have my share. Good night."

"It's raspberry swirl, remember!"

"I remember. You enjoy it for me, okay?"

The rest of the family looked at one another and shrugged. His mother convinced herself he was worn out from the concert and making the arrangements for the upcoming dance. Megan didn't care. Tommy was delighted to get his share of the treat. His father chalked it up to being an adolescent. Ralph just followed him upstairs and dutifully lay on the floor beside his person's bed – not a judgmental bone in his body.

David got ready for bed and sat on the floor stroking Ralph and talking.

"I didn't like what one of my friends said to me tonight, Ralph. If it isn't true, then I don't like him for going ahead and saying it. If it is true, I don't like him for going ahead and saying it. T.J. would probably say that was a joke and I should chuckle or something. Seems dead serious to me. If I'm like he says I am, I'm a pathetic ego-maniac who will never be able to make it out in the big world where I can't possibly control everything. I suppose it doesn't have to be an either/or thing like he indicated. I could be doing it all for myself and still doing really good things for everybody else – both at the same time. Would that be so wrong? *Is* that so wrong? Seems like a win/win to me. That doesn't answer the real question, though – how will I manage my life after high school? I guess here, I am a big fish in a small pond – Thomasville being the pond. This is the only way I know how to be. How will I manage when I'm not all those things he listed – everybody's model and go to guy?"

“Should I appreciate his honesty – if that’s what it was, Ralph – or should I hate him for destroying my picture of myself? I usually don’t stop at just two alternatives like that, so I’ll need to revisit it later and look for more possibilities.

“It was a strange conversation he and I had, tonight. At first it seemed like I was putting myself down and he was defending me. Then, later on, it seemed like *he* was putting me down and I was just taking it.

“Let me help you up onto my bed, Ralph. I need you close beside me tonight.”

* * *

At nine o’clock the next morning, Mrs. Baker received a call from the school saying David was absent. It was their policy to make such a call whenever a student didn’t answer to rollcall first period. The secretary sounded apologetic for bothering her. Mrs. Baker thanked her and went up to his room. His bed was made and he was gone. She knew that part, of course, since he had come down stairs with his backpack and left at his usual time. He had skipped breakfast with some excuse she didn’t remember. She had managed to get a glass of orange juice down him as he passed through. She called her husband and explained the situation.

“I don’t think David has *ever* missed a day of school unless he was sick in bed,” she said.

“I’ll go over to the school and talk with T.J. and Sue. Maybe one of them will know something,” he said.

“I’m leaving for work now,” she said. “Call me either way – find out something or not.”

“Of course.”

Neither youngster knew anything specific. Mr. Baker stopped down at the band room. David looked up to Mr. Carter and he might have indicated something to him. He hadn’t, and Mr. Carter related, that on Thursday mornings David usually spent time before school working with the young trombone players. They were disappointed he had not shown up.

David's father had complete trust in his son, so was not concerned that he was up to anything troublesome. He did, however, begin to grow concerned about his wellbeing. Perhaps something had gone wrong – an accident? That's where his list of possibilities started and stopped.

He returned to his office and called a friend on the police force asking him to just keep a look out for the boy. He agreed and expressed genuine concern. Everybody loved David, so if there were a problem about him, it became the entire community's problem.

Sue had suggested that when he had things on his mind he often walked the woods northwest of town. It was the only possibility she had to offer. Mr. Baker decided to drive to the woods; it was less than a mile from where they lived. When David was younger he and his father often fished the creek there in the summer. As he recalled, there was a special spot his son liked. He parked off to the side of the gravel road and walked into the woods in search of that spot.

Ten minutes later he smelled wood smoke and headed toward it. He saw David through the trees ahead, sitting on a log near a fire on the bank of the frozen creek. He paused to consider his best next step. He didn't want David to think he was spying on him, but it was his responsibility to take care of the boy, and if something were wrong, as it clearly was, he needed to take steps to handle it. He leaned against a tree and just watched for some time.

David was sitting there facing the fire, whittling aimlessly – mostly just staring into the flames. Mr. Baker understood about teens needing time alone to think. *He* certainly had at that age. David had *always* needed that and always seemed to profit from it. The boy was in no danger. If he had wanted to talk with his father he would have come to him. David had never been shy about that. They had always been close. Teens normally draw away from parents. It was a necessary part of separating as they prepared for life as an independent adult. If he had sensed any danger, he would have intervened. David was a level-headed youngster. His father returned to his car and called his wife to discuss what he had done. She agreed.

As he turned the car around to get back on the road, he spotted T.J. trotting across a snow-covered field in the direction of the woods. Apparently, he knew what Sue knew and was on his way to investigate. Even though it meant the boy had ditched school, his presence was reassuring to Mr. Baker. The boy had a terrible reputation, but if David approved of him, there had to be something of substance there. He was surprised at how that reassured him. Teen boys *did* take care of each other. That was good. The concern entered when the problems became adult-sized and they failed to realize they were into things that were beyond their adolescent level of knowledge and wisdom.

As he returned to his office, he tried to recall their last serious talk together. Except for the growing up talks, it had typically been David who initiated them. It had been several years. Mr. Baker was surprised. Life had been busy. David seemed to be handling life well. It was probably one of those 'mental health' days adults took when they called in sick and really weren't.

A few minutes later, T.J. smelled the smoke and headed for it. He spotted his friend and, rather than hesitating like Mr. Baker, he strolled up and seated himself on the far end of the log. At first, he didn't say anything. David didn't legitimize his presence with a look or nod or comment. If anything, he turned away slightly and kept butchering the small length of wood, perhaps with more vigor than before.

"Nice fire. Warm," T.J. said slipping his bare hands into his coat pockets.

"Doofus," David said kicking his back pack closer to his friend."

"What?"

"Gloves. In the backpack. It is winter, you know."

"I keep thinking if I refuse to believe that, it will go away. It seemed to work when I lived in Georgia."

T.J. opened the pack and removed the gloves.

"Thanks."

"Doofus."

"I think we've established that, although I'm not sure what your referring to."

“No gloves and now a preposition at the end of a sentence. You’re intentionally bating me.”

“Me. Bate you. Why ever would I do that?”

“You knew I couldn’t refrain from responding to either one of those things. Thanks, I suppose.”

“You’re welcome, I suppose. You gonna say what your deal is?”

“Stuff.”

“Oh, well, that certainly explains everything. I’ll just leave now, completely relieved about why my best friend is acting like somebody none of us ever met.”

“None of us?”

“When your dad showed up at school to try and find out if anybody knew what was going on with you, it spread through the school like wildfire. It’s all anybody can talk about. Everybody’s worried or at least concerned.”

“Sorry they don’t have lives. Go back and tell them I’m fine.”

“I’ve been known to tell more than my share of lies in my life, but not this time. You’re not fine.”

“You’re welcome to your opinion, I suppose. What’s on the school lunch menu for this noon.”

“Burgers and fries.”

“Sound good to you?”

“Burgers and fries always sound good to me. Ninety percent of this body was built from burgers and fries. You know that.”

“You can still get back in time for lunch if you leave now.”

“So can you.”

“Not hungry.”

“You trying to get rid of me.”

David shrugged and briefly looked into his friend’s face. He turned away without speaking.

They both understood it had *not* been a, ‘yes’.

T.J. spoke.

“If I upset you last night, I suppose I’m sorry – though I didn’t say one thing I don’t believe is true.”

“I understand both of those things. We’re okay. There’s a pack of hotdogs in my backpack. We can sharpen roasting sticks.”

A few minutes later, they were cautiously munching on blistering hot, well charred, juice-dripping, burst at the seams, hotdogs straight off the ends of their newly cut sticks. Few words passed between them. T.J. understood the use of silence better than David. He and he father often had breakfast together and never uttered a word. For them it didn’t indicate things weren’t good. Silence typically made David uneasy. He liked to know what others were thinking and when they were talking he believed he had a better chance of knowing. Still, that morning he remained quiet.

An hour passed. Without words, they emptied the pack of hot dogs. They shared the bottle of water David had brought along.

“Have you ever played hooky in your entire life before?” T.J. asked.

“How is that important to you?”

T.J. shrugged, having hoped it might get a conversation started. Nobody believed in one’s right to privacy of thoughts any more than he did, but when a friend’s behavior represented such an abrupt turnaround, he had to be concerned.

“If you want to go talk with that minister dude, I’ll walk with you,” he said, trying again.

David turned his head toward him and smiled.

“Thanks. No.”

“How long you plan to stay out here? You know your parents are sick with worry.”

“I doubt that. Dad was here earlier so he knows I’m fine.”

“He was here?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t know I know, but he’s not as sneaky as he thinks he is. I sort of hoped he’d come and join me. We haven’t had a good talk in a long time.”

“Who’ fault is that?”

David shrugged again.

“Go home to him and talk. I’ll walk with you and then get out of your hair.”

"I kind of like it here, today."

"We seem to be getting nowhere, fast," T.J. said.

"That will be the title of my biography, *Getting Nowhere Fast*. It will have the subtitle, '*When being on top is really being on the bottom.*'"

"You're depressed."

"A question or statement?"

"A statement from me. Not sure what it is from you."

"You worry far too much."

"I never worry. I drink, remember."

"Dumb!"

"To not worry or drinking?"

"Both, and not for a minute do I believe that you don't worry. You drink to stop worrying, maybe, but, you do worry."

"Now you're my psychiatrist?"

"Somebody needs to be."

"Hey, I'm the one who was at school today, ready to face whatever the world threw at me. You're the one who ran away into the wilderness and took your anger out on a defenseless stick of wood."

He pointed to the shavings on the snow. David cracked the slightest smile.

"You bring a bottle?"

"I never carry the stuff. You should know that. You asking for a drink?"

"Just wanting to make sure of the options."

"Options for me or for you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"That answer makes no sense."

"Why don't you go back to school where you belong and let me think awhile longer? My great thinker has never failed me before, so I have no reason to think it will this time. That's what I mean when I say I'm fine – I'm here with my thinker and that's all I need."

"Won't do it."

"What if I *tell* you to leave?"

"Won't do it."

"What if I beat the hell out of you?"

"I'd thank you. Never wanted to be filled with hell in the first place, Boss boy."

"I hate that name."

"Thought you didn't love or hate anything but people – for everything else it's *like* and *dislike*, isn't it?"

"You are just trying to provoke me, T.J."

"So, be provoked. Take your best shot."

"I hate you. See, I *can* apply the word appropriately."

"I know you can, but *no* you don't hate me. If you hate anybody right now, you hate yourself."

"You're impossible."

"That's not new, Dave. Dad has said it to me every day of my life. I've come to wear it like a badge. You have your saw. I have my badge, the words, 'the impossible kid', arranged around the outside of a felt circle containing the back of a hand with the middle finger raised."

David stood, removed his hat, and shed his coat. He raised his hands as if ready to box.

"You look like an idiot doing that. Put your coat back on before you get frostbite or something."

"You scared of me, '*Impossible Boy*'."

"What's got into you?" David. "You're not yourself. Let's just sit close and think together like we've done other times."

David rushed him and knocked him over the log backwards onto the ground behind."

"I'm not going to just let you beat the snot out of me, Dave. Stop it! I'm ten times the fighter you are. I wasn't even trying last night. Before we moved to Thomasville I lived in the toughest part of a city. I can beat you silly with one arm tied behind me."

David responded with a fist to his face. Blood ran from his nose. T.J. was soon defending himself. Blows were thrown back and forth. They fell, they rolled down the bank together. The snow revealed a trail of blood. The fight went on for half an hour. They were exhausted, but David would not stop. The fire had died out. Snow was blowing in from the north. With one final blow, David lay unconscious. For some time, T.J. had been aware that his own upper right arm was broken. He felt deep through his bicep to determine the damage. The pain was excruciating and he passed out. Two bloody and broken boys, lying unconscious on the frozen ground as new snow covered their bodies like dirt atop new graves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Remind Me to Teach You How to Count!

T.J. roused some five minutes later. As his head cleared, he began reassembling the events just past. He sat up and saw David, still unconscious. He brushed the snow off his body and with great difficulty got him back into his coat and gloves.

“Do I start a new fire and stay here, knowing Mr. B knows where David is or do I begin the trek back to town? With this arm, I can’t very well carry him. I could drag him, I suppose, like a sled through the snow. He should wake up soon and will probably be more able-bodied than I am. I don’t think I hit him hard enough to have knocked him out – made him woozy I suppose. He must have hit his head when he fell. We’ll stay here for a while at least.”

T.J. built a new fire – he still carried a lighter, but then he had carried a lighter since he was five. It was soon roaring, forcing the new snow upward in a swirling vortex above the fire. The flakes reflected the orange light from the flames then melted and fell in rainbowed droplets into the fire.

“Sorry you’re missing that, Dave. It would give you things to talk about for a half hour – a few of them might even be interesting to us mere mortals. I shouldn’t have said that. I should never put down anybody else’s fund of information or ability to express it as well as you can. Sorry. Hope I didn’t damage you in any permanent way during our altercation. It looks like most of those cuts on your face and neck will heal up without scars. The cuts on your knuckles are deeper – some may need stitches. Man, there are lot of them! More of a fight than I intended it to be. Sorry, again. The warmth from the fire feels good, huh? I need to go find some more good-sized pieces of kindling that will keep the fire going. Be back shortly.”

“But what if I don’t want you to leave me?” came David’s weak voice.

His eyes remained closed as he lay on his back alongside the log.

"You been listening in on my private conversation with you, have you?"

"Partly, I guess. I'm really cold. If you could make a little snow wall, even a few feet high just to the north of the fire, it will keep the wind from blowing the warm air away and reflect the heat back into this area."

Even in a semiconscious state, David's brain spun creative scenarios.

"I'll try. Hurt my arm before. Not much use to me right now. Can't you open your eyes?"

"Haven't tried. I'm studying how it feels to be helpless."

"Perhaps you can do that later. Right now, we need a plan – it's time for survival, not contemplation."

"You should have said something."

"I thought I was saying things."

"Sorry. You were. *Gosh* my head hurts."

His eyes fluttered open as he continued.

"You actually knock me out?"

"I think you got knocked out when your head hit the ground – it's frozen solid – the ground not your head, although lately I've been wondering."

David groaned, but managed a slight smile.

"Let me help you up."

T.J. offered his one good hand and David sat up, positioning his back against the log.

"Interesting."

He pointed up.

"The world appears to be twirling around me. Vertigo. Never experienced it before. I understand it may make me sick to my stomach."

"Point it south away from the fire. I've had lots more experience with puking so take my word for that – always downwind from where you're living."

It seemed to pass as the world gradually righted itself.

"What's the deal with your arm?"

"Broken, upper arm, bone's just slightly out of place I think – out of alignment."

"When did that happen?"

"One of the times when you shoved me back over the log, before we really started throwing punches."

“You mean you did this much damage to me with one arm?”

“I told you.”

They exchanged glances.

“I can get that bone back in line for you. That’s the first essential thing. As long as it’s out of place, the sharp edges will dig into the muscle tissue and cause continuous internal bleeding. Come sit here with me – at my feet, facing me.”

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

“Believe me, it has to be done.”

“Scoot close enough so I can put my feet against your upper chest. Then, you use your good arm to hand me the hand on your broken arm. I’ll get a firm grasp on your lower arm and tug it all back into place with one quick jerk. With just a little separation like you describe, the surrounding muscle will force the bones back into position just like they need to be. Then we’ll make a splint.”

They arranged themselves according to David’s instructions. David got a good hold on the lower arm just above the hand at the wrist, his legs straight against T.J.

“I’ll count to three and then pull. Ready?”

“No, but go for it, I guess.”

“Okay, then, One . . .

He jerked immediately. T.J. screamed. Spurting tears froze to his cheek.

“Wow! That feels . . . better. Later on, remind me to teach you how to count. I understand what you did. Thanks. Wow. Thanks. Like a miracle.”

“Keep that arm perfectly straight. I didn’t bring any string or rope with me that we can use to tie a splint in place so you just sit there while I gather some straight sticks.”

T.J. had no idea what was going on inside his friend’s head, but that was not unusual, so he wasn’t even moved to ask.

David took his time as he went through the motions necessary for him to stand – first, he moved forward onto his hands and knees, then moved his torso up so he was balancing on his knees. He turned toward the log, hands on the log, arms pushing him into an upright position from which he straightened up. He weaved back and forth for a moment.

“What a headache! I almost never get a headache – never anything like this for sure. You?”

“I’m an evening drunk, remember. I wake up to one every morning.”

“It must be worth it, I guess.”

“That is always debatable, every morning – never even a consideration as I open the bottle at night, however.”

“Pretty stupid, the way it sounds.”

“I have never suggested it wasn’t.”

“This morning?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Last evening when you left me I felt some degree of indecision in the tone of your voice. Like your words came more out of habit than commitment.”

“So, now you’re a damn lie detector?”

“Sorry, but you asked.”

“Sorry. I did.”

David left to search for the sticks he needed. T.J. scooted closer to the fire. His bargain basement coat left a lot to be desired in 25 degree weather. Five minutes later David returned with a half dozen, straight, half-inch pieces two or so feet long. He took a few minutes to relieve them of sprouts and bumps with his knife.

“We still don’t have anything to use to tie them together, you remember,” T.J. said, not so much doubting him as waiting to be enlightened.

“You wearing a long sleeved shirt?”

“Of course. It’s mid-December in central Minnesota. I’m a Georgia boy.”

“Good. That will protect your skin. I’m going to slip one stick at a time up between your shirt sleeve and the inside of your coat sleeve. By the time we have all six stuffed up in there around your arm, they will lend support on all sides and be every bit as good as if they were tied in place.”

“Amazing! Let’s get to it.”

“May hurt here and there along the way. I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

T.J. began laughing – fairly hard.”

“What?”

As will happen in situations like that, David began to chuckle, also.

“A half hour ago you were trying to beat the life out of me and now you are promising to be gentle with me.”

David managed a smile.

“I can see how that’s funny. You really think I was trying to beat the life out of you? That never entered my mind.”

“Then you must have the capacity to speak without engaging your mind. Consider it an idiom or time honored expression if you want. That’s over – isn’t it – the fight or whatever it was?”

“I suppose so. I’m not sure what set me off. Like last night. Losing control isn’t like me.”

“You seemed to be very well in control. For a kid who never fights, you were a real contender. Have you ever really been in a fight before?”

“In preschool, I got sent home for pushing Sally Lawrence to the floor when she tried to take my cookie at snack time.”

“That’s it, in your whole life? You shoved a girl – a four-year-old girl – over a cookie?”

“Yup. It was chocolate chip! I always figured defending my rights that way was a good thing. You’re making it sound like it was pathetic.”

“Go with *your* evaluation – what a guy thinks of himself is always the most important thing.”

“There, all done and not a single peep out of the patient. I’d give you a sucker if I had one.”

“What you did really helped – this non-splint, splint thing. I can relax my arm now and not worry about hurting it. Thanks, you know.”

“Of course. And thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Yeah. For apparently letting me try to beat the life out of you. Not every friend would allow that.”

“You have any idea what it was all about?”

“Other than I am quite sure it had nothing to do with you, no.”

“I think it may have had lots to do with me.”

David offered a puzzled look. T.J. continued.

“You can’t figure me out and that makes me unpredictable – one of the few things that frighten you. I think part of you has been angry at me for a long time.”

“The way you characterize it, it sounds to me like I’d be angrier at myself for not being able to figure you out.”

“Hmm. At least can we agree you have anger and you’ve had trouble figuring me out?”

“Yes. I can agree with those things. Ready to go again?”

That time David smiled first.

“I need a little while to get my sea legs, T.J. Then, we can start back to town. I had no idea fighting was so strenuous.”

“Do you know how dumb that sounds coming from you?”

“Evidently not. I try never to say things that sound dumb.”

Presently, they covered the fire in snow and began the slow, tedious trek back to town.

“How are we ever going to explain this to your parents?” T.J. asked.

“Mine? You’re the one with the broken arm.”

“And you’re the one with the concussion.”

“Concussion? You really think so?”

“How many fingers do you see here?”

“Waayy too many. You’re right. How do you know about concussions?”

“I’ve had more than my share. Taken care of dad through a lot more than that.”

“You want to talk about that?”

“Dad and his concussions? No. Why would you even ask?”

“Your recent actions seem to indicate that friends care enough about each other to probe where the other one would rather not go.”

“Touché! I see. Okay. Not now, okay?”

“Sure.”

Walking was difficult for them so they kept to the gravel road instead of cutting across fields. It was three times farther that way.

“You look terrible, Dave, which reminds us of my previous question, how are we going to explain this to your folks?”

“I’ll handle it. The first thing we need to do is get you to a doctor who can really care for your arm.”

“I’ll go to the emergency room at the hospital. Dad doesn’t have money to pay a doc. The ER is required by law to take care of anybody who goes there.”

“It still costs something.”

“No. They *charge* you something, but they can’t make you pay if you don’t have any money. It’s why *your* hospital bill will be higher than it should be – to make up for freeloaders like me who don’t have insurance.”

“I’m not going to go to the hospital.”

“I would advise you not to bet on that.”

Two blocks from David’s house, a squad car pulled up beside them. It was David’s father’s friend. He stopped, got out, and rounded the car.

“What in the Sam Hill happened to you two?”

“A long story. Suggestions?” David asked.

“Yes. Let’s get you into the car. I’ll get you right to the emergency room. On the way, I’ll call your dad, David. Do we need to be looking for the bad guys?”

“No bad guys. I’d rather explain it to Dad first.”

“I understand – well, no, I don’t, of course.”

The boys were already being cared for in the ER when Mr. Baker arrived.

“What in the world happened to you two?”

“Not nearly as bad as it looks, Dad. We seem to have done our best to kill each other a few hours ago. Failing in that, we went back to being best friends and here we are sitting next to each other on an examination table, naked as the day we were born under these flimsy gowns that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination from the rear. I assume that will handle it for now.”

“With me, but you know it won’t for your mother.”

“I know, Dad. I love her dearly, but I will *never* understand her.”

“Welcome to the club, and that’s our motto, by the way – ‘I love her dearly but I will *never* understand her’ – no disparagement intended.”

* * *

They were admitted for observation, spent the night in the same room and were released early the next morning. Megan ignored the whole thing, she had more important things to do with her friends. Tommy took possession of bragging rights that his brother had been in a fight and left the house to spread the word. Later, David would learn he had taken out seven bad guys all by himself. T.J. insisted on walking home alone. They’d talk on the phone later. David’s mother was uncharacteristically *uninquisitive* – clearly his father had had a talk with her. That had happened on previous occasions, so David understood it was a lot like piling a few sandbags on a levee that everybody knew was going to give way at any moment. He gave her until after supper. His timing was perfect. His explanation – a non-explanation – was troubling to her. It represented everything she believed her son, wasn’t.

His father’s explanation to her had been that boys that age just do strange things sometimes. They would keep a closer watch on him during the next few weeks and decide if he needed professional help – a visit with a psychologist, perhaps.

That night in bed, David groaned every time he moved. Ralph would meet groan with whimper. He didn’t understand – of course neither did anybody else. The bigger problem that David figured he had to face was returning to school on Friday morning – and he was determined to return.

* * *

Uncharacteristically, a large group of students were milling around in front of the steps when the two boys arrived, together. They had determined that was the best way to begin dealing with it, although facing several hundred inquisitive fellow students had not been part of their vision. They waded into the middle of the throng and David spoke.

“Things have been blown all out of proportion. Things are fine between T.J. and me. I’m sure you all have places to be and things to be doing. Let’s make it a normal school day.”

Unexpectedly, T.J. had something to add. He held up his good arm.

“Anybody who wants to donate a buck to the Youth Service Bureau’s Christmas fund for kids may sign my cast. I had them make it extra big so it will accommodate more names. Write small.”

There were soon a hundred bills waving above their heads as kids pressed in close, pens at the ready.

David stood back and watched. There had been a time when he would have been jealous. That time, he could admit that T.J. was his hero-of-the-moment. He knew there would be no presents for him at his house and yet there he was, making sure other kids would receive some. Could it be that the kid with the unsavory reputation and unkempt hair might actually have useful things to teach *him* – David, Brainiac, the Boss of the School?

They made their way to the office to get the admission form they had to circulate to their teachers. The principal, basically a nice guy who had to maintain a firm and stern reputation, stepped out from behind the counter that separated his desk from the larger, secretary’s area out nearer the door.

He looked them over, motioned for them to turn all the way around and offered but one comment.

“It seems you two have come to some sort of understanding. Welcome back.”

Why couldn’t mothers behave like principals – wait – no – that might not be such a good thing after all. Sometimes, life was confusing.

Having no idea how to relate to them, most of the students just avoided them, eager for the last bell to sound. T.J. went right to his after-school job. David left through his usual exit. Sue was waiting just like he knew she would be.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You hurting as badly as you look like you do?” she asked, gently examining his face with her fingertips. “Black eyes. A half dozen band aids, two gauze bandages – one bloody one over your right ear. And your hands wound in gauze. What were you two thinking?”

“You just need to know that things are fine, now. How are you?”

She looked away as they began walking.

“What’s up, Sue?”

“It doesn’t seem important next to what you’ve gone through.”

“Come on, give. I’m fine now. We need to make *you* fine.”

“Billy came down with chickenpox if you can believe that. Several grade school kids have it – his sister one of them. I guess their family doesn’t do vaccinations so the rest of us have to suffer. So, there goes my big Winter Dance experience.”

“Of course, your big Winter Dance experience doesn’t go anywhere.”

“I don’t understand, David.”

She looked up at him.

“I just happen to know a not so bad looking guy about your age who doesn’t have a date for the dance.”

“You?”

“You say that with some revulsion in your tone.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean it that way at all. Surprise, maybe.”

“Well, I can’t hold this offer open for very long. I understand I am a regular topic of conversation among Thomasville High girls – at least according to the twelve-year-old tap into the female grapevine at our house.”

“Seriously, you are asking me to the dance?”

“I really figured I had made that clear.”

“I once swore I’d never go on a pity date.”

“Pity date? Never, young lady. Granted, I’m probably not as romantically experienced as Billy, but I’m willing to learn.”

Although that did nothing to clear things up, it inched things in the direction of feeling right.

“Of course, I will go with you, but remember I must be home by midnight before my shoes turn to pumpkins – no, something seems wrong with that.”

David offered a smile and chuckle. He wondered if they had been genuine or self-serving.

“Do I need to ask your parent’s permission to have you accompany me?”

“Of course not. You’re like family.”

“That certainly puts a funky twist to the whole dating thing.”

“Stop that. We took baths together until we were five, remember.”

“That we did. It seems there have been some fascinating developments since then.”

“You are terrible. What did you do with my David?”

“Just practicing ‘romantic’. Remember, I’m relatively inexperienced in such things. Sorry if any of that was out of line. This is just new, you know. What time shall I pick you up?”

“It’s supposed to be a really nice clear night. How about we walk?”

“Sounds good. Dance starts at eight. I’ll be at your place at eight. It will make us fashionably late. Less time for questions.”

“Are you sure you want to walk in with bandages on your face and a date on your arm with a gym full of kids there gawking at us?”

“Why not? I’m proud to be your friend and, actually, this seems right, us going together for this. If nothing else, it will simply delight my sister.”

Sue had no idea what he meant, but, being content with her own fantasy, she let it drop.

“Eight will be fine. Mom will want to take pictures. Doubt if we’ll be able to walk through the doors until after the third dance.”

David held out his crooked arm.

“I suppose we should practice,” he said.

She slid hers through his and they practiced all four blocks to the spot they usually separated. David turned with her.

“What’s this?” she asked wishing she hadn’t.”

“Need to get in as much practice as possible.”

“She shrugged and happily went along with it.”

David really wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He hoped she didn’t get the wrong idea. He was substituting and saw it as a onetime thing. He knew girls often took things in ways guys didn’t intend. Regardless, he found himself feeling good. That would take some analyzing, later.

That night he stood in the shower, eyes closed, for a long time. He hurt from top to bottom – he truly believed his toenails and the roots of his hair were screaming out in pain. Ralph remained close by, somewhat confused by the change of routine – standing in the water was usually a morning thing.

David was troubled by the huge reserve of anger he clearly had been holding inside. He had had no idea it was there. He was troubled by the ease with which he had unleashed it against his best friend. Why him? Probably because he believed T.J. understood about anger better than anybody else he knew, partly because he believed T.J. was such a good friend he would not hold it against him later, and partly because he figured T.J. would be able to beat him to a pulp and for some reason David believed he needed to be beaten to a pulp. He wasn’t sure why.

He figured, maybe, it had been born out of a recent, nebulous, realization that he was some sort of monstrous, terrible, human being – a belief that must have been festering somewhere deep inside him for some time. Certainly, he had never consciously looked at himself in that way. He always agreed with others that he was a super-great human being – that all parents should hope their boys grew up to be as fine a person as he was. He thoughtfully worked at being a good role model. David had never considered that such a positive picture of himself could be anything but mentally healthy – total acceptance of who he was.

What if the truth was that he was a total fraud – that he really didn't care about other people's welfare except where it made him look good or provided him a pleasanter environment in which to live? What did it say about him if he believed everybody was inferior to him and only *he* really knew what was good for them? If those things were true – and it seemed at that moment that was how he had been living his life – there was no David Philpott Baker – just some con man, huckster, impostor, deceiver. He had previously considered that when he took other kid's rights to make their own decisions away from them, he was, in fact, rendering them helpless. On the other hand, which was better, living according to the best decisions, or risking a life filled with poor decisions? He knew what T.J. would say and at that moment, it didn't help.

Suddenly, he seemed to have no answers for those kinds of questions. Not having answers was one of the most terrifying feelings he had ever known. Not even the fully pleasing rush of warm water running down his battered body could take that away. Still, he would endure the tradeoff any day – continued physical pain to regain his certainty about life and how it should be lived.

He wondered how T.J. had survived – born of a mother who had not wanted him and who had died before he could prove his worth to her, living with a father who clearly had a variety of serious problems and who, David suspected, was or had been abusive to him, and knowing he was squandering – most likely endangering, even – his magnificent brain as he drank his way into emotional oblivion every night. Still, he functioned well enough to survive and even find ways of enjoying life. In many ways, he was helpful and contributed to growing an improved society. He knew if he asked how he managed, T.J. would blow it off with some insincere, platitude, and retreat from the topic.

Sue was the traditional good kid, from a traditional good home that had presented traditional values, which she accepted without question. She too, was going to do well in life – fit in, play her assigned role, never rocking the boat and therefore never improving on what life had always offered.

It would be another Ralph-by-his-side night in bed. It would be another tear soaked pillow night. It would be another night in which David's discomfort would find pain-induced groan met with sympathetic whimper. Dogs seemed to know things lots of people didn't – maybe couldn't.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“It’s Sue, not a Girl”

“Mom, I’ll need my white shirt washed for Saturday night. I’ve decided to go to the dance, after all.”

It was David’s opening salvo as he entered the kitchen Saturday morning. She’s wearing a long pink dress with a lacy something-or-other-over-the-top-thingy. What color tie should I wear so we don’t clash? I’ll wear my suit – it’s medium blue.”

“Believe it or not, I know what color your suit is. Your lavender tie would be fine or your father’s light blue one. May I ask who the lucky lady is?”

“Sue, sorry, thought I mentioned that.”

“You and Sue on a date?” Megan said. “This goes on Twitter right now.”

“I am going to ask you not to do that, please. I promised I’d keep it all low-key.”

“Geez. One scoop in my whole life and I have to pass on it.”

“Next time I plan to let my best friend beat me up, I’ll give you an exclusive heads up, okay.”

“Okay! I’m counting it.”

Of course, the ‘keep it all low-key’ thing was a promise David had made to himself, but he figured that still counted.

His father entered the kitchen. David went to him immediately, raising his chin close to the man’s face.

“You think I should shave?”

“What?” he asked looking back and forth between ‘the face’ and his wife.

“David and Sue are going to the dance together,” she explained.

His father made a clearly, serious effort to look over his son’s cheeks and chin.

“My vote is no. You’ll just open up all those scabs.”

“Good thinking. I knew there was a reason I kept you around. I may want to borrow your pale blue tie, okay?”

“Of course.”

David turned to his mother.

"I read in a book once that a guy with a new zit covered it with something referred to as *pancake makeup*. You know about that? Maybe for some of my scabs?"

"I just imagine I can help you with that. Can't guarantee to make it a total disguise."

"I suppose that doesn't even really matter. Everybody gawked at me all day long. They probably know more about them than I do."

"Word on the grapevine is that absolutely everybody thinks you went crazy," Megan said, being the helpful little sister that she was. "*Bat crap* crazy is the exact term. Just sayin' for what it's worth."

"You think I went crazy?"

"I've always figured you'd end up that way so I guess I'm not surprised."

"Thanks a lot, sis!"

"You're welcome, *bro!*"

He turned back to his father who, by then, had poured himself a cup of coffee and was sitting at the table taking in the back and forth between his first and second.

"What do I need to do to get ready – this dating thing is basically new to me?"

"Get a pedicure at you mother's beauty shop, run seven laps around the school track in you skivvies, clean your fingernails with a toothbrush until they bleed . . ."

"I don't think you are taking it seriously."

"I'm takin' *it* seriously, just not *you*. A guy doesn't have to prepare for a date. Take a shower, use deodorant, and swish mouthwash just before you leave. That's it, all of it, total, the whole shebang, period!"

"I don't have to kiss her, do I? Scrap that. An oddly uncomfortable question for a boy to ask his father. I'm not against kissing girls. My question referred to Sue. I'll handle that I guess. Maybe I should go take a shower."

Tommy, who had been taking it all in while working on his second bowl of purple and green cereal, spoke.

"You took a forty-five-minute shower last night. That would last me three weeks."

Without comment, David turned and took the steps two at a time up to his room.

"I've never seen him like this," his mother said.

"I haven't either," his father added, "although I'd say it's about time – the boy is seventeen. By that age most boys have been acting like idiots for at least three years."

"I just hope his body don't turn into no prune," Tommy said, compassionately, still fully puzzled by the whole concept of taking showers until compelled to.

"Well, I for one, am relieved," Megan said. "I thought maybe he was not into girls. It's been asked by others."

It was Tommy, again.

"I'm going to say he likes girls a lot. I've looked through his magazines – hidden in his old toy chest. I probably should not have said that should I? And by the way, I predict those women will catch their death of pneumonia – except Miss December, maybe – she has a white fur stole wrapped around her neck."

Mr. Baker began chuckling. His wife joined him, a bit reluctantly, perhaps. They dropped the subject. Had they been perfectly honest, they would have admitted that they were also relieved, even though they were prepared to support their son, whatever.

David called T.J.

"I need to talk with you – about girls and dating. Can you give me a crash course by seven o'clock this evening?"

"You have me confused. Girls and dating – and you are consulting me? As I recall, you have told me I am the biggest pig in the world when it comes to girls?"

"You are, but I figure I can sort out what's useful from what's not."

"Okay then. When and where."

"Hmm. Not here, too many young ears," David said.

"You can come to my place."

"I've never been to your place in all the time I've known you. I figured it was off limits."

"Dad's on a truck run out of town. He'll be gone over night."

"Okay, then. Now?"

"Fine. Just give me time to wake up the girls, have them slip into something presentable and usher them out the door."

“Really?”

“Of course not, doofus. I may make the effort to pull my bed together, but that will be the extent of my preparation. Be prepared for . . . well, for nothing like your clean and well organized place. This is a bachelor pad occupied by a couple of slovenly degenerates.”

They hung up. David figured it had *all* probably been a put-on. T.J. always looked good – clean clothes – well, there was the rumpled hair thing, but that had become part of his adorable persona – it would be missed if it weren’t there.

He lived in a small, older, four-room, one story house in the poorer section town – kitchen, living room and two bedrooms. His room was small, perhaps eight by ten. It was an add-on to the rear of the house and had a slanted ceiling. It was entered through the kitchen – a heavy, green drape covered the doorway. There was one window along the back wall. He had posters – not the kind Tommy collected nor the kind David would have hung. T.J. introduced David to them, pointing.

“Alexandria, Muffin, Jasmin, and Bunny. You’re welcome. Chair or bed, take your choice. I got coffee, but you’re not a coffee guy. Pop in the fridge behind the beer. Help yourself.”

“I’m good.”

He took the chair, turned it around, and straddled the back. T.J. sprawled back on the single bed – no headboard, three pillows piled up against the wall.

“I assume like usual you have specific questions, although I feel the need to warn you that you may not know some of the questions you need to be asking.”

“I see. Well, let me lay out my plan for the evening and you tell me what it appears I will need to know. I pick her up at her home and we walk to the school gym – her suggestion. We hang up our wraps, enter the gym, and do the dance thing. I suppose we punch and cookies once or twice and then I walk her home.”

“First question for you, Dave. Do you know how to dance?”

“Yes. If you will be there I think you’ll be surprised at how well I dance.”

“Okay, then. How do you react when she leans her head against your chest during slow dances?”

“Why do I need to react?”

“It’s like your signal to her for what your expectations are later – after the dance.”

“My expectations are that I will walk her home.”

“And what about the expected kiss at the front door?”

“I have thought about that. This is Sue, not a girl. You don’t think she’ll expect that her best friend will try to kiss her.”

“Do you want her to expect that?”

“I don’t know, probably not. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“So, it’s more like accompanying your sister than a girlfriend.”

“Yes. I imagine she sees it the same way – brother.”

“What’s a term that’s more of a put down than doofus?”

“What? *Idiot*, I suppose would work.”

“David, you are an idiot. You are an idiot’s, idiot. How can you not know she’s in love with you and has been since the age when girls first fall in love?”

“Sue? Loves me? Romantically, you mean? Hold tight in dark corners and lock lips loves me, you mean?”

“I’m surprised you even know about those options. Have you even ever really kissed a girl – on her lips – mouths open – down her throat?”

“Just between us, right?”

“Of course, *Philpott*.”

It didn’t seem humorous to David.

“Yes. At Band Camp, last summer. The girl was single-mindedly-insistent about it. Many times over the course of the week.”

“And?”

“It was nice – is that what I was supposed to say?”

“No, you should have said it made your blood boil and your groin burn.”

“Okay. It did those things.”

“Really? Okay! Good going, Davioso!”

“Not sure that I can really take any credit. It just happened the way it will happen.”

“Did you write an essay about it – *‘Physiological reactions to a close encounter with a female of the species and how it just happened the way it will happen?’*”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Of course, I am. That’s what best friends do at times like this. You clearly don’t want things to go beyond the minimal sort of encounter. My advice is for you to decide if you want to kiss her. If you do, what kind of kiss – forehead, on the lips gently, open lips with tongue, need I go on?”

“I know about all those. I’m well versed in the physical aspects of romance.”

“So, if at that moment at her door you want to kiss her, either just kiss her or, if you insist on being a stuffed-shirt-gentleman, ask if you may kiss her, first. Thank her for the evening and open the door for her. Leave before the door closes because she will want to watch you on down the walk and begin her next 24 hours of fantasies.”

“You haven’t told me anything I hadn’t already figured out – well, the door thing, I guess.”

“I’m afraid my real expertise with girls is in areas you have no interest in pursuing with Sue. Up to that point, you got what I got. I can go on into the lurid details of . . .”

“No. You have really helped me, though. You reaffirmed that my thinking was on the right track.”

David paused for just a moment and looked T.J. in the eyes.

“You really *do* go all the way with girls, don’t you?”

“Absolutely, at every opportunity that presents itself and many more that I create.”

“How can we be such good friends when our takes on such things are so different?”

“I suspect it’s because I’ve never really been interested in dating you.”

David actually broke a smile and chuckled.

“I’m told some of the kids think I’m gay. Is that how you’ve thought about me?”

“I have no reason to think about you one way or another. Straight or gay you will have monumental problems with ongoing romantic relationships because to be good and lasting they have to be two-way. You’re such a frickin’ control freak any close relationship is doomed before it begins. Frankly, I’m surprised you took Sue’s suggestion to walk to the dance.”

“It sounds like you’ve already decided my life is going to be a sad and lonely one.”

“I probably have – unless you miraculously find some way to loosen up.”

“Why do we get along so well? Do you think I try to control you?”

“Two interesting questions. I suppose I don’t allow it, do I. For some reason, maybe, you don’t feel the need to control me. Why is *that*, I wonder?”

“Because you are a breed apart from most of the human herd, T.J. – you are mentally strong – you live your life according to your rules, unencumbered by anybody’s else’s rules or expectations or judgements. My rules certainly don’t guide your life – they never could. Your rules certainly don’t guide mine. I probably believe that you can take care of yourself, even though I really don’t understand how that can be possible for a person like you. No offense intended, there.”

“None taken. I think you’re probably right. It is an odd relationship.”

“What do you mean,” David asked.

“Two best friends, resigned to let the other one follow a path they feel certain will destroy him in the end. You’d think best friends would fight that all the way. Are we just really strange?”

“I see. I understand what you’re saying, I think, and, yes, by all possible measurements, we are really strange, if, perhaps not in identical ways. I’ll admit something to you. Back in the earlier grades I intentionally tried to stay away from you because I saw I’d never be able to take care of you or control you. That night after band practice when we finally talked together – seriously for the first time – I had what my grandpa calls a ‘what the hell’ moment.”

T.J. smiled. David almost never cursed. He turned directly toward David.

“What’s that?”

“I heard myself saying things like, ‘What the hell. Go for it. I have never ever met anybody so different from me in most every way as T.J. I really need to get to know him. Who knows, he might have something to teach me or maybe I can at least learn how to never become like him. I’m pretty sure we’ll never change each other so that’s a relief up-front. I won’t have to try. Maybe I will, for the first time, have a relationship built on being relaxed about relationships.”

“You really said that to yourself?”

“Probably not in words, but certainly at a feeling level. After that, every time I saw you I felt myself relax all over. It was like some gigantic smile overtook my entire being.”

“I have to admit my reaction to you was pretty much the same – back from the early days as well. I have no idea why I like you, because deep down we both stand for such different things, but I do really like you.”

He turned his head and looked out the window as he continued.

“I will miss you something awful when you leave for college after our senior year.”

“My. I’m not sure I knew guys said things like this to each other.”

“*Once said, said for always* – that’s something my dad’s dad said once. It’s pretty profound for a fourth-grade dropout.”

“Your grandfather?”

“Not sure, and that should be enough said.”

David grimaced. Among all the other horrible things in T.J.’s background, he was not even sure the man he called dad, was his father. He understood he could not change any of that for him, but he could try to see that there were fewer of those kinds of situations in the future. There he went again, only that time, he was setting his sights not just on being the boss of Thomasville High School, but of the whole world.

The realization disturbed him beyond his ability to comprehend it. He could never be that. Yet, David Philpott Baker, believed he *had* to be that. Living in his win/win world seemed to have just passed dangerously near the shadow of a lose/lose adult life.

“Well, thanks for whatever it is that went on here today,” David said as he stood and set the chair back in place.”

T.J. sat up smiling at what his friend had just felt the need to do – put the chair back where he had found it. Such a thing would have never entered T.J.s head.

“Yes. Me too,” he said. “For whatever it was.”

“By the way, I haven’t heard you say if you’re coming to the dance,” David said.

“I’ll be there. You know I wouldn’t miss getting a chance to watch you dance.”

“Prepare to be schooled, Big T. Going stag?”

“The Big T, stag? Never! Not sure who, but I assure you she will feel like the luckiest girl in the gym.”

“What’s the saying – no conceit in your family because you have it all?”

“Something like that, I suppose. Not sure it’s conceit when it’s true, however.”

They exchanged smiles as they moved toward the front door.

David looked back at him as if he were about to say something. Then without having said it, turned to leave.

“You don’t have to worry, Dave. The Big T will arrive sober and without a flask. I’d never do anything to ruin the Big D’s Winter Dance.”

“I have the urge to thank you for that, but it doesn’t seem we do that.”

“And I have the urge to thank you for not thanking me but, as you said, we don’t do that.”

“Understood, then, I suppose,” David said as they approached the front door.

“Yes, understood.”

What *neither* of them understood was that they *did* thank each other. Often. Strange!

Outside, for some unfathomable reason, David noticed a few tears navigating their way down his cheeks.

Inside, for some unfathomable reason, T.J. noticed a few tears navigating their way down his cheeks.

“Enough of that!” David said wiping his face dry with the sleeve of his coat.

“Enough of that!” T.J. said pulling his T-shirt up to cover his face and falling face down on his pillows.

* * *

At 6:45 that evening David stormed into the kitchen.

“Mother! I didn’t get Sue a corsage. I completely forgot about it. I was just talking with Jim, who is managing the minute by minute activities in the gym this evening – which are all going like clockwork, by the way – and he mentioned how nice the flowers looked on the refreshment table. What am I going to do? Are florists still open?”

“Two things, David – well three, including this first one – please begin breathing more slowly before you faint dead away. First, I have a wrist corsage ready for her, waiting in the refrigerator. Second, they only had red roses left, so your father went out and got you a red tie – It will tie the two of you together, nicely, I think.”

“Pun intended?”

“No, but I’ll take credit for it.

“You are the best, Mom. I know I never tell you that, but you are, even T.J. says so. He says I have the best parents in the universe and I agree.”

“Here’s the tie. Take it to the frig and see how well it matches the flowers.”

“I’ll take your word. I’ve never been good with colors. Don’t let me forget the flowers when I leave. How do I look?”

“*Handsome* as usual and you will even look *presentable* once you put your pants on.”

“Oh! That would have given the kids an entrance to talk about wouldn’t it.”

His mother sat him down, draped a towel around his shoulders and proceeded to apply the pancake makeup. David watched in a hand mirror. She removed the large bandages and most of the band aids.

“Like magic. Thanks. I’d almost think you’ve been through this before.”

What about that? A forty-year-old mother knowing something about makeup? BOYS!

Promptly at eight, David was at Sue's door, red tie carefully tied, corsage held behind his back and suit pants in place. He had opened his long winter coat thinking that would make a better first impression – the suit, the tie and all. He knocked. Her mother answered the door. He was not expecting that. How had T.J. missed that possibility?

"My, don't you look handsome, David. It is so sweet of you to go with Sue. She was heartbroken when Billy had to cancel. Come in. Love that tie."

"It matches her flowers," he whispered.

He revealed them for just a moment. They continued in whispers.

"Is she ready?"

"I think she wants to make a grand entrance down the staircase, there."

She called up to Sue.

"Some kid's here who says he's got a date with you. Can that be true?"

She appeared at the top of the stairs and slowly made her way toward the first floor. David continued whispering with her mother.

"I've never seen her like that. She is really beautiful."

Her mother whispered in an aside.

"It might be better if you told *her* that."

He cleared his throat, walked to the bottom of the steps and met her there taking her hand.

"You look fantastic. I didn't know you had it in you and I already know that was the dumbest thing a boy ever said to a girl in the whole history of boys and girls. I brought flowers."

He handed the clear plastic container to her.

"Beautiful. Thank you. Look mom. A wrist corsage. How thoughtful considering the way my dress is designed."

Sometimes mothers collude.

Her mother took her flowers and handed her a red boutonniere, which she pinned in place on David's lapel. It may have been as close as their faces had ever been.

“I don’t understand how you knew red roses are my favorite,” she said. “I don’t remember ever talking flowers with you.”

“David knows all – haven’t you heard.”

“I have, and now I even believe it.”

David took the corsage from the container and slipped it onto her wrist. He had practiced on Megan with his mother’s supervision.

“Okay, kids. Stand up on the bottom step for pictures. Closer. Put your arm around her waist, David. Your Junior Year Winter Dance is no time to be bashful.”

That certainly hadn’t sounded like any teen-girl’s mother he’d ever heard of!

Sue looked up into his face and he down into hers. He hoped that unfamiliar boiling blood could not be detected from the outside.

Her mother took several pictures. They didn’t wait to look at them. He helped her on with her coat and boots. It was Minnesota in winter – all the girls would arrive in boots, shoes in hand.

“Curfew?” He asked, looking at her mother as he opened the door for them to leave.

“Eleven. Call if anything delays you.”

“Of course.”

He figured that had been the most confusing curfew ever offered to a teen boy who was about to whisk a mother’s daughter off for an evening of semi-romantic activities.

“So. Here we are,” David said as they started down the sidewalk. “It seems all I have to say are dumb things. Sorry.”

“Hey. This is you and me going to a party. Relax.”

“No, this really isn’t you and me. I’ve never seen you dressed up like this and never found myself in a position with you where I suddenly realized I had no idea what was expected of me. You’re so beautiful and I’m just me.”

“Let’s make a pact, right now,” she said. “This evening is all about having a good time. Any further considerations are secondary.”

By the time they reached the gym, David had himself under control – he felt confident that his blood temp had dropped to somewhere near 190. Inside, the entry hall was mostly empty except for a few chaperones. They spoke with them briefly, hung coats, removed boots and they were ready to enter. They paused at the closed door.

“You ready for this, Sue?”

“I’ve probably been ready longer than you’ve known.”

“T.J. made a similar comment to me this morning. We probably need to talk about it.”

“Yes, later. We’re here to just have a good time, remember?”

They linked arms, David took a deep breath, and pushed the door open. They stepped into the semi-dark gym. The band stopped playing and offered a fanfare. A spotlight suddenly focused on the two of them there at the door.

“What the?” David whispered.

A voice came over the loudspeaker – it sounded familiar – *T.J.* familiar. What had the rascal done now?

“The Thomasville High School Winter Dance Entertainment Committee, is proud to welcome this year’s King and Queen, known to most of us peasants as just plain, Dave and Sue. Clear the way and let’s have them take a turn around the floor. Does the Royal Couple have a song to request?”

David bent down and the two of them whispered back and forth for a moment. Then David spoke.

“Your band guys happen to know the oldie, *In the Still of the Evening?*”

The band members spoke among themselves, the piano player plunked out the melody for them, and presently the leader nodded. David and Sue walked to the center of the floor. The music began.

Being true to their ‘have fun’ pact, they broke into a dance routine that astounded every last person in the room. There were struts and twirls and over-his-head lifts and bends and dips and pulls through his legs and, well, you just had to be there to understand – either *that* or you needed to have been at their *sixth-grade* music program. They were brushing off the dance routine they had presented back then and giving it one grand encore. In the original, at the conclusion, they had fallen to the floor, assuming fetal positions.

“So, same finish?” David whispered as the end rushed in on them.

“Of course. We’re here to have fun, remember.”

Plop!

Plop!

And so it was on that very cold December night in the beautifully decorated gym in Thomasville, Minnesota, that the King and Queen of the Winter Dance were swarmed over by their classmates and soon found themselves, precariously perched on the shoulders of fellow Wildcats in a most undignified, once around the room salute, which included a *rousing* version of the school’s fight song.

T.J. held back, offering his wonderful smile and a slow clap, astounded again at his fully unexplainable best friend. His eyes momentarily met David’s from across the room. They exchanged a nod. David didn’t know the girl clinging to T.J.’s arm – well, to his arm, his neck, his shoulders, his waist, and so on. Things soon returned to how they had been – young couples dancing, awkward boys standing in the stag section nursing revolting punch, and officer Mallard relieving several of the boys of flasks – some of which had been hidden in remarkably creative places.

CHAPTER NINE

He's Got All the Bases Covered

David and Sue danced almost every dance – together. He found it pleasant to have her head against his chest during the slow dances. Unlike T.J., he had no plans beyond that and was sure Sue didn't either.

They arrived back at her front porch at 10:55 – they had taken their time on the walk home, holding hands – bare hands – even in the freezing temperature. They recalled interesting moments at the dance, agreed that Cindy's mother's punch recipe should never again be inflicted on humanity, and reminisced about how well their surprise performance had gone.

“So, Sue began, “On Monday are we going to be proud or embarrassed about our dance number?”

“Why do we have to be either? We danced. We had a good time. The other kids seemed to enjoy it.”

“Some will believe we were forewarned about the royalty thing so we prepared.”

“How could we? The votes were not counted until 7:30 this evening. I arranged it that way to prevent any kind of shenanigans.”

“I didn't know that. Now, I really do wonder what they think about that? I mean it couldn't have been something we just made up as we went along.”

“If you would feel better, I'll explain to T.J. and have him seep it into the gossip grapevine.”

“Is it dumb for me to want the truth out there?”

“I suppose not if you think that question will ever actually arise.”

“Oh, it will arise. You can bet it'll be topic one on all the girls texts this weekend.”

“I'll take care of it, then. Speaking of taking care of things, how weird would it seem if I asked you if I could kiss you?”

“Very. But I hope you won't let that stop you.”

David's intention was for the gentle, closed lip variety T.J. had described. In the end, it became something much more than that.

“Seems like I should say ‘thank you’ or something after *that*,” he said.

“Then, it seems like I should say ‘you’re welcome’ or something like *that*,” she said.

They stood on her porch for a few more minutes, mostly just looking at each other, contemplating possibilities. At the stroke of eleven, the porch light lit up their world.

“Parents,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“*Mothers*, is probably more accurate,” he said. “They’re the ones who remember how depraved we teen boys are. Thanks for making it such a good time. I had no idea how much I needed it.”

“It really has been a good time. Thanks.”

Sue raised up on tiptoes and gave him a quick peck to his cheek then turned and went inside.

As instructed, David turned and walked away, hoping his departure was being watched like his friend had predicted.

David dialed his mother’s phone.

“I’m one block from home so you’ll all have time to scramble back into bed and pretend you haven’t been waiting up for me.”

He laughed loud and long about his little prank as he hung up – a little prank that was completely uncharacteristic of him. That crossed his mind, but he didn’t dwell on it.

At the top of the stairs, he paused just long enough to call out: “Had a great time. Thanks everybody for your help.”

He turned the light on in his room and chuckled at what he found. Ralph and Tommy were both sound asleep in his bed.

“Hey, Tiger, let me get you back to your own bed.”

He picked him up, leaned down, planted a gentle kiss on his forehead and returned him to his spot next door. Tommy roused as David pulled the covers up around his neck.

“You okay, Dave?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Don’t know. This dating thing is new to me. Still got a lot to learn.”

He was immediately back asleep.

David got in bed, on his back, unusual for him at night. He put his arm around Ralph who seemed relieved to see him and scooted closer.

“What is it with you guys being worried about me?” he said, ruffling Ralph’s ears.

Sleep did not come easily. Thoughts swirled. Questions formed. Answers eluded him. He replayed the kiss numerous times, making mental notes on how to improve on it. For one split second, he wondered about T.J. – if he were alright – but immediately took his mind in another direction. It was one of those times in their lives when their differences became clearly drawn.

Sunday morning, David awoke not at all sure he had been asleep. If he hadn’t, however, he had in some way become involved in a street fight in a city alley – trying to protect two girls from a gang, the members of which all bore a remarkable resemblance to his best friend, wore skimpy winter jackets and no gloves. He lay in bed for some time – not like him. The random thoughts from the night before continued – the fate of his essay surfaced.

That question immediately chained to thoughts that focused on politicians who David believed were so callus they could vote themselves raises while ignoring all the innocent kids who went to bed hungry every night and for whom their parents had no way of providing medicine or doctor’s care when they were sick. He wasn’t sure if *that* was really his main concern or if it was the fact that he was becoming more and more certain there was nothing he could do to change them – the politicians.

It would be impossible even for Bill and Melinda Gates to feed all the hungry kids, let alone for David Baker. It was concerns like those that had come to consume him since he became close with T.J. His friend had personal stories from his life in the city in which he either had to steal food or go hungry. David had never found himself in a situation where stealing became necessary. He believed stealing was wrong. He had come to believe that in such instances, however, it had not been T.J. who had done wrong – it had been the politicians and maybe others – like himself – who could have acted to make a difference but had not.

In David's case, it had been because he really hadn't been aware of it. He had always believed that people in Thomasville took pretty good care of each other through neighbors, the school, churches, the Rotary Club – thing like that. He just expected all communities did. *His* was a sin through ignorance. If he had known, he would have found ways to help. The politicians, on the other hand, had to answer to the sin of willful neglect. They knew, and they chose to do nothing to help. They were the ones guilty of the wrongs, not the kids who had to steal to eat.

They could, of course, be voted out of office. David was too young to vote. The larger problem seemed to be that they had been voted *into* office by people who apparently believed like they did – 'look the other way from such suffering, Mr. Politician, so you can lower my taxes. Promise to do that and I'll vote for you.' The very thought infuriated him. In his diligent, personal search through religious beliefs, David had not come across *one* that condoned such behavior, in fact, he believed they were proactively out front of suffering, and active in prevention. How could it be then, that his nation, a nation of people who largely purported to be believers in religion, behave that way? How could they live with themselves for so easily putting their *wants* before the *needs* of the suffering?

Once roused into full consciousness, he took a cold shower. He wasn't sure why – he hated cold showers. Coach required them after poor practices. Perhaps to punish himself for not being more proactive, himself. For the first time, he wondered seriously about how many kids really did have to go to sleep hungry there in Thomasville. He had always assumed, none, but had no solid evidence to base that on. He would talk with Mr. Terwilliger, his Sociology teacher. They could plan a way to find out. Then, they could go to work solving it. When David set out to define a problem, he then, all quite automatically, had to solve it.

The more he thought about it, the less it seemed that churches and other organizations *really* were proactive in the way he had just figured they were. They all talked a deceptively good game, but they mostly just did things to clean up the mess – food pantries *after* families got hungry, free clinics after family members got sick, clothing cellars after they ran out of things to wear. If the causal problems – unemployment, lack of education or training, and lack of affordable housing, for example – could be solved, most of the cleaning up stuff could be eliminated – it needed to be a switch in focus and allocations – from damage control to prevention. Those were the terms he had been searching for in his essay – *prevention* and *damage control*. What was that Old West saying, something about it doing no good to lock the barndoor after the horse had been stolen?” In some way, he felt it applied.

His thoughts had been so fired up over it all that he hadn't even been bothered by the cold water – and *cold water* in northern Minnesota in December was COLD water.

He dressed for church – slacks and a long-sleeved shirt and tie. Since he sang in the choir, the robe covered everything else. During church, he couldn't keep his mind on the sermon. Usually, he remembered it pretty much word for word so he could discuss – often dismantle – it later with the minister.

At home that noon, he helped set the table. The house was filled with the wonderful smell of baked chicken, one of his favorites. He remained quiet through dinner. Tommy took advantage of that to ramble on about things of importance to him – his Christmas list, his Christmas list, and, of course, his Christmas list.

“It sounds like your list has changed from what we were hearing earlier in the week,” his father said.

“You noticed that, did you? I appreciate the attention and consideration that suggests. You have been listening. Well, I got to thinking about what Dave said about the kids who won't get presents so I'm asking for some things I think other kids my age will like – I think it's called more *generic* instead of things about my interests. Is that the word – generic?”

He looked at David. David was, in his eyes, the smartest person in the world. Even Mom and Dad had to take a back seat to him in that way. Now, an earache in the middle of night required mother. Gremlins in his closet at night required his father.

“Generic is a great word for that, sport. That is really nice of you. Maybe just give away two or three of them at your age. A ten-year-old needs new stuff, every once in a while, you know.”

“We’ll see when the time comes, I guess.”

Once they had finished dinner and lingered over the peach pie, they all helped clear the table.

“How about the men do dishes today?” Mr. Baker said.

It really had not been a question and the boys understood that.

Their father enjoyed listening to his sons talk about what was important to them. That day it was going to be an afternoon of sledding down the hill at Ashton Park that drove Tommy’s interest.

After a few minutes, David suggested that Tommy should probably go get bundled up for his afternoon so he wouldn’t be late. Tommy looked up at his father who nodded. Clearly, David had something on his mind. Tommy was soon ready and on the way out the door.

“I waxed my runners,” he said as if that delivered the essence of some important aspect of the upcoming event.

“He’s hard to understand,” David said. “On school mornings, it takes him five minutes to put on one shoe. Today, he manages a complete change of clothes in three.”

“Perhaps if they added early morning ‘sledding’ to the fifth-grade curriculum,” his father said.

They exchanged raised eyebrows and chuckles.

A long moment of silence followed. His father washed. David dried. Presently, David spoke.

“I kissed Sue last night.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve kissed girls before, but last night was really nice.”

“I see.”

“It really confused me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. As a friend, I see her one way. As somebody I kiss, I think I see her some other way.”

“And?”

“And, like I said, it really confused me.”

Silence.

“I’ve always been too busy for girls – I didn’t say that very well.”

“Try again, then.”

“My observation has been that guys who become attached to one girl, become fully non-functional in most other areas of their lives. I have always had wide interests that are really important to me, so I didn’t want that to happen – not yet, at least.”

Silence.

“I’ve always liked girls, but I guess I was afraid my life would fall apart if I gave into those feelings. Things are so good between you and mom and I guess I don’t understand how you seem to be keeping it together everywhere else.”

His father chuckled.

“What? I’m serious.”

“I’m not chuckling at your seriousness. I’m chuckling at your sincerity, at your innocence, I suppose. Relationships do take time and commitment. It is how folks get to know one another at deeper, more personal levels. When budding hormones are involved it can seem all-consuming. I’m saying I understand the point you have been making. Take you and T.J. for example. You’ve known each since when, the fourth or fifth grade, but you’ve only become close during this school year, and it has taken time and commitment, hasn’t it?”

“But I’m not obsessed with wanting to hold him close and kiss him – you do understand that.”

“Yes. How can I say this? Relationships with girls at your age exist on two planes – friendship and romance. When a boy meets a new girl, they need to work on both of those. Since you and Sue established the friendship plane long ago, you’re mainly left with just the Romantic plane to investigate – if I’m reading your interest right.”

“Oh, yes. All of a sudden I have a definite romantic interest.”

“The romantic plane has two levels, itself. One has to do with physical, sensual, and eventually sexual things. The other has to do with deepening the personal relationship beyond mere friendship, to a more focused level of caring and perhaps love. The person becomes precious to you in a different way. One person really can’t describe that to anybody else because it is always a very personal thing. You realize it when you realize it.”

“My thinking has been following those same paths, I guess. It’s like a romantic feeling adds ‘really’ in front of a lot of things: a ‘really’ best friend, a ‘really’ precious person. I mean T.J. and Tommy and Megan are precious to me, but I don’t feel like I want or need to always be around them, protecting them, but with Sue, I suddenly do – I feel like I *really* need to be there with her making sure nothing happens to her. You think I am on the right path?”

Exactly the right path, or in the words of my beloved eldest son, REALLY the right path.

There were smiles between them. David remembered the last growing up talk they had. His father said something like, ‘you have all the basic information now and there will never be anything more I can add to that for you, but, there will come a time when it’s not information you will want – it will be feelings you’ll want to talk about. Remember, I will be here when that next big step comes along.’

“I guess this has been the ‘feelings’ part of our private talks. Thanks, you know – I mean for everything and of course that doesn’t come close to saying what I mean.”

“Been there, son. Believe me, I understand. You know I’m proud of you for all you accomplish, but mainly what I want for you is happiness.”

Ah, ha! Suddenly the reason for the dishwashing session took center stage.

“Are things going along well in that department? Perhaps I shouldn’t have stuck my nose in there.”

“I know you’re proud of me. I’m proud of you to, but I’m betting I’ve never told you so. I am working on the happiness thing very hard right now. I find my world overflowing with ugly and fearsome things to be *unhappy* about. You will say it is all about finding a balance I can live with – a balance between what’s wrong and what I can *reasonably* do about it. It’s the unfairness of the small amount of ‘*reasonably*’ I seem to have to offer that tends to get me down.”

“I was impressed a few weeks ago how you described having broken down the preparations for the dance into small parts and assigned them to committees. It seems to have worked well, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. All the kids and even the faculty, say it’s the best Winter Dance the school has ever had. I seem to be missing something here – your analogy?”

“You have to come to think about fixing the chaos in your world, like organizing the dance. You never expected to take care of all aspects of dance preparation yourself. You can’t do that with the tribulations of the world either. In your mind, you must set yourself up as chairman of one committee with one set of realistic responsibilities and then do your best to fulfill them. There will always be other people working on other ‘committees’.”

“I see what you’re saying. I’ve never been satisfied to be on a committee, however. I’ve always needed to be in charge of the big picture. I have no idea how to be a committee member. I am more the creator and organizer than the doer. I mean, I do get what you said and it makes sense . . . for anybody else. I promise I will give it good thought. Thanks. I hope if I’m ever a father I will be as dependable and wise as you are.”

He hung the dish towel on the rack beside the sink and turned to embrace his father.

“Watch out there, son. You’re a *man* now and you have the power to easily break your old father’s ribs – ribs, spleen, liver, gallbladder – you get the idea.”

They parted with smiles. His father went in search of his wife to reaffirm how much he loved her. David went to his room with lots to think about. Megan attended to the only really important part of her life, texting with her friends.

David figured a truly important conversation should always raise more things to consider than it answered. By that criterion, he had just had the most important conversation of his life.

For the first time, his father had proclaimed him a man and with that came a whole collection of important and unavoidable responsibilities. The exchange had reminded him that his father no longer had the vitality of a young man – eventually that would mean he would become David’s responsibility to watch over and care for. And then the complex of things related to a male’s responsibility to his special female. The part that stuck out as most bothersome was the committee thing. David had no idea how he was going to dilute his life-long need to be in charge – of the whole thing. The answer was, of course, he had to find a way to make his ‘committee’ *his whole thing*. Lots of luck with that, Boss of the School, Evil Genius, King of the World.

In his room, he lay back on his bed. A few moments later Ralph joined him, content to lay on the floor nearby. David reached back over his head to the bookshelf in his headboard. He ran his fingers along the spines, eventually coming to rest on a mystery, *Case of the Restless Crossbow*, one of the Detective Raymond Masters Mysteries he had enjoyed a few years before. One page was dogeared. He opened it. A passage was underlined. The old detective was talking with a boy. He said, ‘No case – no problem in life, in fact – can be solved until you find the proper question to ask.’

Through the years, he had read and reread it often, thinking it was profound advice. Since he remained confused about life, he figured he had not yet found the proper question. When referring to *the meaning of life*, it probably meant for ‘question’ to be plural – asking the proper *questions*. David had asked so many. Had none of them been the right one, or had he just missed it – overlooked its grand importance? How was he to know?

He remembered back to a conversation he and Sue had when they were no more than eight. He had said he was having a tough time waiting until he grew up so he would have the answers to all the questions he had. Sue responded with something like: 'Davy, your head was built to make up a really lot of questions. What if it wasn't made to be able to find all the answers?'

That exchange haunted him to that very day. He had turned the conflict around during those past few years: What if his head was not able to ask the proper question/questions? It disturbed him. The one thing he possessed that he had always been able to count on was his 'head', as Sue had called it. His mind was more intelligent than 99% of people – he had been tested in fifth grade. The more probable answer, then, was that if *he* couldn't find that proper answer, in all likelihood, *nobody* else could either.

Whether the universe had an edge, for example, played no important role in the human experience. He couldn't travel to the edge of the universe to see what was up. But, he could travel among many kinds of people who found themselves in a wide variety of situations – success, failure, happiness, sadness, health, illness, normal, abnormal, hungry, full . . . He could see their problems. He could even spin actual solutions, but, often, he had no way of implementing them – making them work. Maybe his personal committee could help alleviate the hungry, young tummies in Thomasville, but that would do nothing for the hungry tummies in Springfield, or Jacksonville or Martinsburg. Nor would it alleviate the loneliness of old folks or the fears of hospitalized children right there in town. He went on and on, building the case that even just the wide-range of problems in little Thomasville would be more than he could ever handle. That was like a billionth of a speck in terms of the total of the world's problems.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes against the world, and willed himself to sleep. David didn't normally sleep during the day. He had too much to do. His recent realizations had abruptly suggested he had way too much to do and way too many important questions to answer. He was confronted with feelings of sadness, incompetence, defeat, and despair, all of which were unfamiliar and frightening for him. David had not allowed himself to be frightened since first grade.

Just as sleep often provides people periods of relief from problems, fears, and unwanted thoughts, so does depression provide relief from problems, fears, and unwanted thoughts during wakefulness. Although David could not know beforehand, when he awoke from his unusual, Sunday afternoon slumber, depression would have already begun wrapping its sinister tentacles around his life. There would be a kind of dulling of feelings at first. Then, responsibilities would cease having power to motivate him to take appropriate actions. Later, it would pull him away from people, especially those who had been close to him. In its most insidious form, it might try to pull him away from life itself. All of that was often preceded by a series of seemingly innocuous, often subtle, typically unrecognized goodbye messages. One of the most telling would be if he began giving away his precious possessions. Another, would be avoiding or pulling away from people or commitments. The ultimate, of course, would be acknowledging he had no acceptable future and to act on the need to end his suffering.

David was a fighter, however. David had always believed in himself above all else. David had spectacular capacities that most people did not have. If anybody could beat it, this was the young man who should be able to. Just ask anybody in Thomasville – they'd all tell you – 'no reason to worry about that David Baker kid. His head is on straight. He's got all the bases covered.'

CHAPTER TEN

The Worst Decision of His Life

At three o'clock his father called up to him.

"Time to go out to the retirement home for the party, David. Your mother dropped off the gifts on Saturday so there would be packages under their tree. We need to hurry. Like usual in this household, we're running a little behind."

David struggled to re-meet the world, knowing it was a duty he couldn't shirk. The old folks would be looking forward to seeing him. He slipped back into his slacks and Sunday shirt, and managed his shoes on. He just sat there for several minutes. He really didn't want to go and even considered feigning a headache, but he didn't.

The party went well. There were enough cookies and salty crackers with cheese to keep the resident's blood sugar and blood pressure out of sight for the entire following week. Old folks are good for young folks who are feeling down, because they won't allow it. David was shared from one old lady to another all around the dance floor. They insisted that, like in previous years, he distribute the presents. He sat on the floor under the big tree. To help put Tommy's nose back in joint from having been plucked away from his waxed runner sledding adventure – after two hours in twelve-degree weather – David asked his brother to make the actual deliveries. He read off the names, the person raised their hand, and Tommy, feeling much like Santa, happily placed the packages in their hands. The women gave him a kiss. He did his best not to wipe them off. He was happy that half of them were men who shook his hand or patted his head instead.

They returned home at four thirty.

That evening David picked at his food and had little to say. He forced his smile and nodded where nods seemed appropriate. He passed on ice cream for dessert and when his phone rang – the family rule was for phones to be off at meals – he looked to find the caller and asked to be excused. It was David, so of course he would have a good reason for the behavior. His father nodded, but shot a look of concern down the table toward his wife.

Megan and Tommy understood it had been strange, but neither thought twice about it. It was David, so of course he would have a good reason. He went directly to his room. It was Sue.

“Hey, Dave. The choir sounded great this morning didn’t you think? I thought maybe T.J. would be singing. You said he seemed to enjoy practice.”

“Not sure what he’s thinking. Haven’t talked with him today.”

“You okay? You don’t sound like yourself.”

“I may be getting a cold. What did you want?”

His response was uncharacteristically short – curt, even. There was no joy in his voice. Sue plunged on ahead.

“Mom said I could invite you to come for supper some night this week.” “Which one would be good for you?”

“I don’t know. This is stacking up to be a really busy week.”

“Oh. Okay then. I just thought after last night. Oh, well, when your schedule frees up then, I guess.”

“Yeah. When it frees up. Thanks for the call.”

He hung up before she could say good-bye. He was self-aware enough to know that had been out of character for him – rude by any standard – but not enough to have been concerned about it. He had been sitting on the edge of his bed, while talking. Ralph finally made it up the stairs and took his place at his person’s feet. After giving Ralph’s ears a good scratching, David lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. He recognized that was not typical for him during the day, but did not feel compelled to analyze it.

Ten minutes later there was a knock on his bedroom door. Without opening his eyes, he replied.

“Come in, T.J.”

In a dreadful attempt at imitating a girl’s voice, the knocker responded.

“Oh. This is not T.J. It’s his friend, Loose Mary Jane. He sent me over to comfort you.”

“Come in or leave, T.J.”

The door opened.

“How did you know it was me even before I started talking?”

"It's ten minutes from when I hung up with Sue. During that next fifteen seconds, she called you, indicated something might be wrong with me and you ran all the way here – ten minutes flat – good time. You are two good friend. I appreciate that, but I'm fine."

T.J. sat on the floor next to Ralph, talking directly to the dog.

"What's wrong with ol' Davy, boy? He get a burr up his . . . nostril?"

"You don't have to clean up your mouth for me."

T.J. continued his conversation with Ralph.

"My! Certainly *not* his *nostril*, huh, boy?"

"What do you want? Oh, that's right, I know what you want. Tell Sue I am a little tired and may be coming down with a cold."

"You haven't had a cold since fifth grade and you got more energy than anybody I've ever known. We're your friends. We're worried about you – the really odd changes in your behavior this past week."

"I thought it was your thing to leave others to themselves – not waste your concern on anybody else."

"That was B.D."

David opened his eyes and turned his head toward his friend.

B.D.? What's B.D.?"

"Before Dave."

"If you are implying I have influenced your beliefs, I advise you to return to your own."

"Damn, you are really bummed. What's happened?"

"If anything has happened please don't make it your business. I suggest we return to how things were before that night last September in the band room."

"Sorry, can't do that. Remember what my dad's dad said?"

"Of course, I do. I remember almost everything I've ever heard. '*Once said, said for always.*' So, what?"

"Maybe never said in so many words, but we've agreed to be friends – unlikely, I must admit, but we did it, nonetheless. See, *that* proves it."

"What? What *that* proves what?"

“I just used the word, ‘nonetheless’. I never even knew the word existed three and a half months ago.”

“You are now counting in half months?”

“Seems so. Think it will catch on?”

“You are being absurd.”

“Thank you. It’s become one of my best attributes, I believe.”

“You are becoming excruciatingly insufferable. Have you picked up those words?”

“No, but from context, I’m guessing they mean a humungous pain in the ass.”

David offered the faintest slip of a smile and half a chuckle.

“Please leave me alone – me and Ralph.”

“Really! *Me* and Ralph. Your grammar is slipping.”

David rolled onto his side and raised up on one elbow to face T.J.

“Look. You became one of the best friends I’ve ever had. I thank you for that. The same for Sue. Right now, I need some space – I think a best friend would allow that. You know me – the jump back kid. I’m fine. Just need some time. Big things on my mind. Okay?”

T.J. stood, shrugged, and walked to the door. He turned, having one last thing to say.

“Before, you were talking about things that I believe. Well, here’s another thing: Only misguided, ignorant people won’t turn to their friends for help when they need it. Amen, so be it, *que así sea*. You know where I am. Any time. My phone knows how to ring, day or night.”

He opened the door and left – partly sad, partly angry, mostly frightened.

David lay back. He had never realized how uncomfortable it was to cry with his eyes closed. He turned onto his other side. Ralph whined as if taking offense at the affront.

* * *

School began at 8:30. David typically arrived at soon after seven to begin another busy day. On Monday morning, he arrived just in time to slide into his seat in Chemistry as the bell rang. He had neither his book nor his binder with him. He intentionally had not looked in Sue's direction. He did not participate in the discussion, which surprised both the other students and the teacher. Nobody mentioned it.

Fourth period – just before lunch – there was a student council meeting. Mrs. Haskel, the faculty sponsor, raised several criticisms about the dance. David understood it was how she maintained her self-respect – always putting others down was her way of trying to build herself up. He had always just let such things pass – pitying her, more than anything.

"I just expected this group of students to do better than that," she said.

"Has any group of students ever lived up to your expectations?" David asked with no intention of sounding polite about it.

"Well, I suppose not."

"Then, it seems to me *somebody* has their expectations for kids our ages set unrealistically high. I wonder how many kids *that's* hurt?"

In the end, it had morphed into an angry voice – one none of them had ever heard from him before. He picked up his bag and stormed out of the room. Face met face around the circle of desks, all stunned and perplexed by what had just unfolded.

David went directly to the principal's office, walked behind the counter without invitation, and flopped into the chair beside Mr. Hays' desk. He sighed one huge sigh.

"I just told off Mrs. Haskel in a Student Council meeting. Don't require me to apologize, because in no universe am I sorry. She is the least student-friendly human being who ever set foot inside a school building."

"I'm sorry you don't have an opinion about her, David. What's really going on."

"I have absolutely no idea, sir, but if I were you, I'd watch my tongue or you just might find a seventeen-year-old raving maniac climbing across your desk fully prepared to choke the very life out of you. . . . Sorry for that, I suppose."

“No. I *did* ask what was going on. I think I need to write you a pass to go home until you’re ready to return.”

“You’d suspend anybody else for that!”

“You want to be suspended, is that what all this is about?”

“I have no idea what this is all about. A pass is probably the right way to go. Will you ask Sue to call my assignments to my mom instead of me?”

“Certainly. You want to stop by the Counselor’s office before you leave.”

“Hell . . . er, sorry, heck no! Every time I go in there I end up counseling him. This whole damn school is put together backwards – upside-down – inside out, where I’m concerned. May I leave now?”

Mr. Hays wrote out the pass and pushed it across the desk toward David.

“Be sure to bring it with a parent’s signature when you return,” he said.

The man understood something significant was going on with the boy. He also understood that forcing a discussion, mid-crisis, would be totally out of place.

“I will need to call your parents, you understand,” Mr. Hays said.

David nodded.

“Please make it dad, if you will.”

Mr. Hays nodded and stood, his signal that David was dismissed.

Once home, he went directly to his room, stripped to his boxers and lay down, his statement to the universe he was there for the duration. At that moment, his preference was never return to school. He knew he would have to, of course. At least he didn’t have Mrs. Haskel for a class. How would he ever face the other students? In ten seconds, he had blown the image it had taken him seventeen years to build.

Sleep came immediately. His dreams were frightening – vivid colors, unidentifiable locations, lots of disjointed movement and distorted faces. The ‘actors’ were all screaming as if in pain. In the dream, he put his hands over his ears, but that would not muffle the disturbing sounds. Suddenly, he found himself at the edge of a high cliff looking down on all those people – red, green, yellow, purple, blue people. His next action was clear. Without hesitation, he dove off the cliff, arms spread wide, suddenly at ease, awaiting the ultimate relief.

He awoke with a start before the dream completed. He sat up, face and chest soaked in tears. Ralph wasn’t there. Holding Ralph had always helped during bad times. He turned himself to sit on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands, sobbing out loud. It was a brand-new experience – being emotionally out of control, not understanding what was happening, having no idea what he needed to do.

He stood and paced. He always did his best thinking when pacing or walking outside. Fifteen minutes later there was a knock on his door.

“A virtually naked boy in here. Enter at your own risk. My preference is that you just get the hell out of my life, T.J. Only bad things can come of a relationship with me right now.”

The voice from the other side of the door:

“In the first place, this is your father, not T.J. although he was waiting on the back stoop when I arrived just now. Second, we are going to have a talk.”

“Come in of course. Sorry for the cussing. Really, I just need some time. You know I’ve always handled things.”

“That you have, whether you should have had to or not is another question.”

David moved to his bed where he sat with his legs crossed. His father pulled a chair in close.

“I have been on the phone with Mr. Hays.”

“I know. He probably wants to expel me.”

“On the contrary, he is very concerned about you. For what it’s worth, so is Mrs. Haskel. She apparently – how do you say it, *flipped out* after your tirade – and went on and on to Mr. Hays about what a lousy human being she was – not having realized it until you apparently rather directly pointed it out to her. Also, for what it’s worth, every last student at the high school walked out in protest. I’m not at all sure they know what they are protesting. I think it’s really just their way of telling *you* that they love you?”

“That probably makes them the most misguided bunch of high schoolers ever.”

“Or, you might have said, ‘how nice of them’.”

“This is my sheepish look in case you’re wondering. How’s mom?”

“Not good, but you surely already knew that. She and I have had a brief phone conversation and we have decided – that’s WE have decided – that we are going to take you to visit with an adolescent psychologist over in Grosbeak. He comes highly recommended by both Doc and Reverend Coffelt. The earliest opening he has is for Wednesday. Until then, you will not return to school.”

“Two direct orders in a matter of ten seconds. That may be as many as you have given me in my entire life up to now.”

“And perhaps, that has been our mistake.”

David frowned.

“I’ll leave that for you to ponder. I assume you do not want to talk or you would have come to me today.”

“As you can tell, I have no idea what I want right now. I know you think a shrink is the right way to go, but I’m not convinced.”

“You are going to go at least twice – we’ve made those appointments. I expect you to take that huge brain of yours along and cooperate positively in those sessions.”

David wanted to point out that it would be his *mind* that he would be using – the processes that take place within the *brain* – but thought better of it. Instead, he nodded.

“I understand. Thanks for doing what you think is best. Do you and mom believe I’m crazy?”

“Not at all. I’m sure Dr. Watson can explain the difference between your situation and insanity.”

“*Dr. Watson?* Really? Like Sherlock Holmes’ Dr. Watson? Perhaps I should I take one the Masters’ mysteries with me so the two of them can compare notes.”

“I hoped you would take this seriously, David. Surely you can see that something is not as it should be.”

“I can. Thanks. Sorry, if I made it sound like I am ungrateful. I love you both more than anything in my world.”

“His father stood.”

“I’m not up for another hug just now if that’s what you have in mind,” David said.

“I understand. I hope there is one for your mother when she gets home. Women, you understand.”

“They shared a quick, if weak, smile. His father moved toward the door saying: “T.J. says he’s going to sleep on the back porch if necessary until you agree to see him.”

“Hand him a couple of blankets, then. I’m unavailable to the universe – well, maybe God if he drops by.”

Ralph entered through the open door. David and his father managed a chuckle.

It was Monday afternoon. That gave David most of two days before his first appointment. David was determined to have things worked out by then. He stretched out on the braided rug beside Ralph. The animal’s rhythmic breathing had always offered a settling pace for him. He had calmed down considerably since leaving his hideously painted people behind. He was quite sure he didn’t want to go back to sleep and risk another such disturbing encounter. He just might never risk sleep again.

He couldn’t imagine offering himself up like a sacrificial lamb to the probing of a psychologist – regardless of how highly recommended he came. Requesting help for deeply personal things had never been a part of David’s approach to life. Up until recently, he figured that had worked well – or, perhaps it hadn’t and some cumulative process had finally reached the tipping point, sending him into his tailspin. Those two contradictory thoughts certainly didn’t help point his mind down a useful path. For some reason, he didn’t even care – and worse than that he didn’t even care that he didn’t care.

He recalled a situation that arose the summer between 7th and 8th grades. He had always been a good batter in Youth Baseball, but early in the season he found himself in a slump. One of his coaches was a local minister. He asked the man if he had any suggestions about getting out of his slump. "I'm always an advocate of prayer," he said. That was not what David was looking for. He decided on what he thought was a plan with a far better probability of success. He'd begin batting practice for an extra hour first thing every morning. During one of those sessions it came to him. During the twelve months since the previous season, he had grown five inches. What he needed to do was lower his line of swing just a bit to compensate for the growth. Whether there was anything scientific about that or not, by the next practice he was consistently hitting balls into center field. The point was, David believed he had found that David could take better care of David than anybody else – including God, apparently. He had kept to that rule, slavishly, ever since. He understood most folks there in Thomasville would not agree with him on the God thing.

Somewhere along the line his rule had gradually absorbed an entirely different – additional – meaning: not only did he take care of himself best, he would not allow anybody else to take care of him for fear they would mess things up. He was too valuable to risk that. People depended on him. Lots of people. Most all the people in his life. So, he had huge responsibilities, and one of them had become taking care of himself, so he would never risk defaulting on his responsibilities because of anybody else's messing up his head.

Within his world as a younger teen, that seemed to have worked quite well – excellently, in fact. From his perspective, perfectly. The adult world, which loomed just ahead, suddenly seemed to have different rules.

"I have no idea how to face the future," he said to Ralph, stroking his head. "Somehow, I have to solve that. Well, I should solve that. Who says? Maybe not. Why should I? Let everybody take care of themselves. I shouldn't have to. Whatever!"

Ralph whined and panted. David sat stroking him for a long time, not really thinking and yet allowing all sorts of images to play inside his head.

Unexplainably to David, over the next several hours he began feeling some better. The worries drained away or at least became unimportant. He found himself smiling and chuckling at absolutely nothing and tussled with Ralph like back when he had been a pup. He got out his laptop and began writing as he sat on his bed, back against the headboard.

At one point Tommy entered, needing help wrapping a package for his class Christmas party. David helped, cheerfully and in an unhurried manner.

“By the way Tom, I’ve been thinking. I’m probably never going to need my ball mitt again now that I’m running cross-country.”

He stood and went to his dresser, the permanent home of the mitt and the game ball from when his team won the city championship in 8th grade.

“I want you to have these. Just promise to take good care of them and think of me when you play with them. One more thing, let’s keep this just between you and me until ball season comes around, okay.”

“Okay. Thank you. That’s the first time you’ve ever called me Tom. Should I expect that from now on.”

“Absolutely, Tom. You are growing into a very fine person. I’m proud of you – proud to be your brother. Love you.”

Tommy left, elated on at least three fronts – perhaps five.

David passed on dinner, but his mother brought him a tray anyway.

David continued writing. He found he had a lot to say. It went on and on.

Late into the night it came to a good stopping point – well, a stopping point at least. He printed it and put those half-dozen pages neatly on his pillow – after rather carefully making up the bed. He took several minutes to straighten his room. Ralph was asleep. It was ten minutes before midnight.

David had decided on the solution – it was the worst decision of his short and recently troubled life. Once that decision is made, things immediately appear to be better again. The worry is gone. The pain is gone. The fears of life and its multitude of unknowns are gone. The needs, feelings and reactions of others fade from importance. It's all a fantasy, holding no truth whatsoever, but the person can't realize that.

David dressed, put on his coat, cap and gloves and, assuming T.J. might still be on the back porch, opened the window beside his bed and let himself out onto the roof of the bay window on the first floor. He climbed down the sturdy trellis that had allowed his clandestine exits on many previous occasions. He walked off into the darkness.

Some distance away he paused, turned and studied his house, silhouetted there in the moonlight. He took a deep breath, entered the woods, and would never return.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

David's Note

Those things that can be said about taking one's own life have all pretty well been said by others. "It is a fully selfish act that pays no attention to the needs and feelings and lives of those left behind." Suicide has been referred to as, "a permanent solution to a temporary problem." There are others.

One function of depression is to dull feelings about relationships and other people and their reactions, so even understanding the first comment above (a selfish act) offers no deterrent against the act. For the terminally depressed person *he* becomes his entire world – nobody else really matters. It is often as if there are no other people in his world. It has been described as moving among 'shadows of people'. In the second, the problem facing the suicidal person is *never* conceived by him as being temporary. It becomes the all-consuming focus of the moment and blinds that person to every logical or moral argument. There is no looking beyond it.

[A technical note: The devastating kind of depression that David experienced typically progresses over months or even years. For the sake of the story, that process needed to be condensed here.]

Near the end, David made one final attempt to make sense of life – or, perhaps to defend his final decision. This is what he wrote.

David's note:

I don't really know to whom I am addressing these thoughts – to myself, most likely. Mrs. Walters, my freshman Composition teacher, noted that she believed I often thought better – more thoroughly and logically, I suspect – on paper than during spur of the moment discussion. She said that although I held my own well in discussions and debates, my essays were always superior to most of those she had received in her 20 years as a teacher. I have come to see she was correct – about the fact that I do think better when composing. So, I guess, this is my attempt at doing the very best thinking of my life – certainly the most important. A lot seems to be at stake for me, here. I plan to write until either I believe that I am truly on the road to coming to grips with life, or accept as true that I cannot and never will. It will surely ramble, more motivated by momentary whim and loose associations than logic.

I am terribly depressed. I realize I have been mildly depressed – off and on, at least – for years, but I smiled through it so it wouldn't burden anybody else. It began in 8th grade – a truly terrible year for me, got some better as a freshman and significantly better during the first semester of my Sophomore year. From there, it has become an up and down ride. I even rationalized it by making myself believe it was a burden all extremely bright people had to carry – that it reasonably surfaced as a young teen. *We* understand that terrible things in life have no solutions. The less bright have received a wonderful gift from the Universe – not being able to see those things – at least not as clearly and constantly. I'm not sure a really bright person can have *hope about the future of mankind*. I often cry myself to sleep, having to change the pillowcase in the morning so mom won't find a wet one.

What has been so depressing? Recently, it has related to my hope that in my future I will be able to continue improving everything for everybody – the way those who know me expect I will. As I move out into my adult life I can see how that is unrealistic – impossible – a pipe dream. (I wonder if a pipe dreams about lung cancer or is just egotistically satisfied to brag about its aroma. Such odd wonders have been a highlight of my life.)

Humanity is going to hell and *hardly anybody* is concerned enough about it to do what's needed to prevent it. At least I hope *some* of those 'hardly anybody's really do know what to do. If they do, they haven't shared it with me. I seem to be the one who people count on for answers to questions like that. How totally frightening that is (for me, I mean, although in reality, *them* thinking that I might know, should send them out of their gourds with terror.)

It appears to me that aside from the many obvious sub-types of people on this planet (and where else might people be, one might ask) we pretty-well separate into two main social categories. I will describe them at their extremes. Lots of folks are some mixture of the two, I suppose. I'll call them the ALTRUISTIC – those who believe it is our social purpose in life to see that all of humanity is safe, happy, and well cared for. The other group I will call the GREEDY – those whose bottom-line seems to be getting for themselves as much as possible of everything they value, regardless of any negative or hurtful effects that might have on other human beings (either by errors of *commission* – intentional – or *omission* – thoughtlessly not seeing others' needs.).

Example: The Altruist will gladly pay more in taxes or give more to charity or spend more time volunteering to see that humankind is safe, well cared for and comfortable. The Greedy, while gathering wealth, power, and stuff for themselves, have no reservations whatsoever about letting the sick remain sick, the hungry remain hungry, the lonely and forgotten remain lonely and forgotten – if that’s what it takes for them to do their self-serving gathering. I could go on (unfortunately), but that should make my point. I would add that where the Altruist believes that nobody has to *earn* basic human rights, the Greedy, if they are at all inclined to offer token help to others, believe those others must pass certain requirements before they deserve care and attention – accepting one certain set of moral values, or adhering to a certain religion, or having lived an ‘upstanding’ or at least ‘acceptable’ life. Perhaps worst of all is *not* having been born into a family that can adequately care for them as a child, especially when that mother and/or father don’t meet those Greedy folks’ requirements. For example, babies born to an addict do not deserve detoxification, food, medicine, or life-saving operations because of the ‘unacceptable’ life that parent has supposedly lived. It infuriates me. It should infuriate everybody who has a shred of decency in them.

It seems to me that the Greedy person is among the most unbalanced of all individuals on the planet – virtually totally self-centered, comfortably blind to the needs of others, so absorbed in protecting himself with wealth and such that he is unable to be compassionate at any meaningful level. He builds emotional and illogical walls between himself and the rest of humanity – US, the good and deserving people, and THEM, the bad and/or undeserving people. Individuals among this Greedy group will turn on each other in a moment if they believe it will benefit them. I find no historical suggestion that *that* has ever happened in an authentic, Altruistic group.

It makes me sick to my stomach. I've read that many folks like that may have brains that were born hardwired to be fully self-absorbed and self-protective. They, therefore, become afraid of any change that questions their beliefs (safety) – like social progress. They hold slavishly to the old ways that have felt secure and comfortable to them. It is the ultimate expression of lives based in uncontrollable fear.

Understanding the neurology, still doesn't solve the problem for the survival of mankind. If anything, such an explanation probably dooms mankind to extinction – sooner rather than later – with something like 25% or 35% of humans being born to *have to be* Greedy. (There's a good title for a Country Song – *Born to be Greedy*.) Quite logically, greedy people often acquire the wealth and therefore the power in this world, and power, misused, can obliterate the altruistic efforts of the rest of us with the stroke of a pen (or sword). How can there possibly ever be a solution unless some *altruistic power monger* gains control of the world and requires it? In itself, the concept in that statement is logically untenable – the terms form an oxymoron – altruistic vs power monger.

Society is largely to blame. It is set up to teach the young that the most important bottom line in life is to make a lot of money. It's everywhere you look. Even some churches teach it. It should, instead, be establishing an altruistic approach to living as the bottom line. Society will destroy itself based on what *it* touts to its children as the goal toward which they should strive (money and stuff rather than helpfulness). Grrr!

It comes to me just now, that although people born to be Greedy probably can never become genuinely altruistic, people in the Non-greedy camp CAN learn to become greedy, through environmental forces – greedy adult models, parental or religious philosophies, reaction to the pressures or negative forces of life. More reason to believe the war between caring only for oneself and caring for all people will never be won by folks like me and my family. Why keep trying? Why continue to live in a world in which you are set up to fail? Everybody expects me to do great things in my future. How can I, in a world so stacked against me. I will be able to do nothing but disappoint them. I can't imagine disappointing people.

Speaking of failing, I seldom have, but I need to elaborate on what I mean. People expect me to succeed at everything – anything – I choose to do. Recently, I have come to see that out there in the big world, to which I am yet to be exposed, my chances of succeeding will become dramatically reduced. *Here*, I'm the smart one. Out there, there are thousands of smart ones. I've never had to compete with other really smart people. Some, maybe many, will be my match or better. There is the 1% out there that's smarter than I am. Let's see, with about eight billion people out there, that 1% tells me there are some eight million people that will best me every time I turn around. In that realization, I am doomed to let down all the people who believe in me. I have never let anybody down – well, maybe in the past few days – but I see so clearly now that in a short amount of time I will be letting everybody down – parents, Tom and Megan, teachers, Sue and T.J. If only I been born dumber there would be fewer expectations on me.

Those are problematic situations and questions that I must find answers to, *this evening*.

I've heard the suggested answers – 'take it one day, one crisis, one challenge, one threat to mankind at a time. If you just help one person you are a success – you have won one more battle.' I've been doing that all my life and nothing really changes – not the big picture, I mean. I help one person and his situation improves. A greedy person neglects one needy person and he continues to suffer or die. It's a tossup – a cancelling off.

I read something in a book once that has stuck with me. I have given it a lot of thought and I truly believe it – at least I thought I believed it. An old man was asked by a kid what he thought the purpose of life was. The old man answered: "There are two purposes of human life. The BIOLOGICAL purpose of human life is to reproduce and assure the continuation of mankind through future generations. The SOCIAL purpose of human life is to take very good care of each other. If we are not successful with the second of these, we cannot be successful with the first."

Here's my dilemma – basically, all Altruistic folks can agree with what the old man said, but for Greedy folks, the second part of what he said (that we must all take care of each other) doesn't dare make sense or their total 'Me First' belief system falls apart. If there is no way for men to agree on what is most central to human existence, how can things ever get better for us? Could we divide every city or country into two sections – one for the greedy and one for the altruistic? I'd bet my bank account that before the altruists could blink an eye the greedies would invade their half and conquer them.

As I write, I can see that much of my quandary is based in problems that surround the definitions of 'right' and 'wrong'. My church and my home make an altruistic approach to life, *right*, and a greedy approach to life, *wrong*. I have to assume many folks have been raised to learn just the opposite – since there are so many of them out there. I can't imagine anybody waking up every morning and saying, "Well, today, lets' see how much *wrong* I can do to the world," but in essence, that's just what a lot of folks do – except they believe their way *is* right. I just don't get it. I can't imagine that believing, 'I'm going to ignore those whose suffering and other problems might cost me time or money,' could possibly be seen as *right* and yet it clearly does by hundreds of millions of people.

Maybe what I call 'right' and 'wrong' they characterize on some other scale. Maybe 'right' becomes 'helpful to me' and wrong becomes 'not helpful to me'. Hmm. Self-centered, self-absorbed, self-protective become 'right' and their opposites, become wrong or at least misguided. Their lives revolve around what does the most good for *them*, rather than what does the most good for *humanity*. In that case, the old man's thinking about the purposes of life becomes unimportant. In their selfishness, they could care less if mankind survives beyond their lifetime.

Merely understanding that – if that is really correct – does nothing to solve the huge problems the world faces. They are how *they* are, and we are how *we* are. Laws to protect my way only work up to that point where those others, are able to ‘buy’ or ‘force’ the courts and enforcement agencies to look the other way and it sure seems my world has passed over to that side – money and power allow one to behave anyway one wants to and there seems to be nothing I can do about it. Rich folks can afford the best lawyers and poor folks get stuck with the less experienced, less expert lawyers. Who will win *there* do you suppose? The poor, the sick, the underprivileged, the needy, can never afford to buy the votes needed in congress to address their needs the way the wealthy can.

I hear adults using the word *Oligarchy* a lot recently. It means that a small number of super-wealthy people – often not even elected people – control the country. It is as if a person’s vote no longer counts because the moneyed and powerful buy votes in congress to advance themselves and their interests regardless of how it may ignore the needs of people as a whole – or the law or the constitution.

Maybe, if we would do away with money it could be solved. Without money, nobody could buy any legislator’s vote. Then, it would probably disintegrate into those with the most physical power gaining control, and we would deteriorate into a world without laws – roaming bands of armed people attacking each other. I know it is already that way in some parts of the world, notably parts of Africa. It is how man lived during his cave-man past. Perhaps we can’t escape our primitive beginnings.

As civilized beings, I suppose we still have laws and in the case of my country, a Constitution. Perhaps they will be enough – perhaps – if there are enough who thoughtfully and persistently resist attempts to let the oligarchs have their ways.

Sometimes at church I help with the two-year-old's during Sunday morning service – if they want something somebody else has, they go take it – they are essentially, completely self-centered. If it takes pushing another child down to obtain it they push him down and are fully unconcerned he may be hurt and crying. I was a two-year-old once so I was that way myself; therefore, it's in me somewhere. Some folks never get away from that. Maybe it's stashed away in our genes or our subconscious minds and none of us ever really get away from it – we just cover it up so we appear to be socially acceptable.

I guess people who have no socially protective principles may just always continue to exist. I have no idea what to do with them. When *they* gain control of a country or the world, 99% of the people on earth will hold no value – be comfortable or uncomfortable, live or die, it makes no difference because those in charge have no intention of doing anything about it. The welfare of others does not concern them. Somehow, we – well, *the* good guys – have to find ways to win.

Every time I begin trying to think through all of this, I am determined to stick to the positive path and see where it leads. I can never seem to find where that positive path begins, let alone, where it goes. Dad says I need to think smaller – do what I can for those whose lives I can personally touch. I do that, all day, every day and the world is still going to hell in a handbag. There is something in me that says that approach may be fine and satisfying for most people, but I am clearly put together to work on the big picture and am never satisfied diddling with the little picture – the tiny parts that never seem to fit together with all the other parts. Like the Winter Dance. I made the master plan and then assigned committees to work on each small segment. Everybody but old lady Haskel said it turned out wonderful-ly. I guess that up to now, at least, deep down inside I have believed if I were put in charge of the world everything would turn out wonderfully, also.

The monied, ruling class can only exist when there are peons to perform the tasks that make the ruling class money. If the powerful guys don't come to realize that laboring group must be kept safe, well, happy and content – the essential guideposts for a lasting civilization – society will surely break down, leaving the big guys empty handed and broke. Maybe that's the solution. Collapse society from the bottom up and force us to start over. So, to help society succeed, I must first help it fail. Not my style, I'm afraid.

I have studied a dozen or so of the main religions. They all seem to mostly agree on what is *good* and what is *evil*. They each even have their own rendition of the Golden Rule – all developed independently, in some cases thousands of years apart, by smart, observant people. That makes me believe there is at least a broad, general, universal set of 'rights and wrongs'. However, all religions – well, most – believe *they* are right and the *others* are wrong, and because of that, many of them feel they have the right to impose their beliefs (the *right* ones) on everybody else (who hold the *wrong* ones). Some radical sects even believe it is their holy duty to kill everybody in the world who doesn't adhere to their beliefs. They all purport to believe in 'loving thy neighbor as thyself'; in other words, *let my neighbor have the same freedoms of thought I do*. No, no. None of them seem to mean that by their 'love thy neighbor' stuff.

In eighth grade, I wrote an essay that I think was titled something like, 'Church Round-Robin'. Since most of us really don't know what other churches believe – even just Baptist's vs Methodists vs Nazarenes – I suggested that once a month everybody should visit a church that wasn't theirs so everybody could at least understand each other. It wouldn't be an attempt to change anybody's mind. I also suggested that within each community, church leaders should get together and determine what beliefs they all held in common, then every Sunday or Sabbath all the church goers would get together to study those commonalities before going off to their individual churches to pursue the differences. I took it to all the ministers in town. They all gave me essentially the same response: 'Why would we want to do that?' I gave them all a lengthy list of reasons including my bottom line, 'understanding one another is the primary basis for peaceful cooperation and co-existence,' but I never heard from any of them again.

In another book, I once read something like, when the truly wise person sees that the task at hand is impossible to finish, he quits and moves on to something else. My problem is that, in my case, the task happens to be fixing the human species so peace, knowledge, safety, productivity and love of self and others permanently engage and improve human life on our planet. To preserve the species in an ongoing, positive manner. I have established to my satisfaction that cannot be achieved so, I have no alternative to move on to. (I know, the preposition, thing but just try and fix it! Okay, 'toward which to move'.) With no alternatives, there is no purpose for me – no reason for my being.

I think I had a pretty good run in terms of helping others even if, in the end, I have established that I have been a fully selfish being – needing to have things done in my way and move toward MY outcomes, my goals. By any measure, I have been a failure in achieving my ‘big picture goal’. Although my methods have been selfish, the end products I have sought, I truly believed were for the benefit of my fellowman. Perhaps I tried to be that impossible force – the *altruistic power monger* that I mentioned somewhere above. Society will soon disintegrate and there is not a single thing I can do about it – and since holding things together has become my purpose in life . . .

I guess that’s it. This piece seems to have fulfilled its mission.

**BE SURE TO
READ FOLLOWING SECTION**

**Some Things You Will Want to Know
About Teenagers and Life
Before You Leave
DAVID'S STORY.**

It will be of interest to the reader to know that at 17, *the author was David* right up to those final minutes, when, instead of opting for the tragic out, he sought help, fortified his personality, and went on to acquire four University degrees and make a number of contributions he believes have been useful – he was a clinical psychologist for 35 years working primarily with adolescents, a college teacher, a life-long educator, a husband, a father, a foster father, the author of over 100 novels and 250 short stories, and served one term as president of the International Association for the Study of Perception. If, like David, at 17, he had opted for the permanent solution to his temporary problems, none of those things could have happened – none of those thousands and thousands of lives could had have been touched. (And now, in his 80th year, he believes he still has a few more useful books percolating somewhere inside his old gray matter!)

* * *

David has just revealed much more about himself than most of us are willing to reveal to others. He was a very bright and loveable young man. For a seventeen-year-old he was even wise – but wise at seventeen is not as wise as one needs to be to answer and successfully cope with many of the major questions of life. So, not to be wise enough, at seventeen, is normal, usual, typical, okay. *Not to understand that, can be devastating for young people.* It is one good reason for teens to keep adults around! Listening to their ideas, doesn't necessarily indicate that you agree with them nor does it require you to accept them (or to argue about them, for that matter!). It merely suggests you are already wise enough to inform yourself about a wide range of possible alternatives, evaluate them, and take thoughtful steps on your path toward becoming a wise adult. Like David suggested, 'Never stop looking after finding just two sides to an issue. There are bound to be many.'

It has been said that to become wise, one must do at least three things: listen well to a wide range of ideas, make lots of mistakes, and learn good lessons from each and every one you make. Every day, the author makes it a point to listen to others who hold different views from his. That is the only way one grows. Only listening to those who agree with you, keeps you inside a bubble of intentional ignorance.

To grow mentally and emotionally, we must be willing to try, and trying often risks failing. That requires some degree of courage. *Failing tells us two wonderful things.* First, what not to do next time, and Second, it proves that we were brave enough to try – to commit oneself to growth, expanding one's horizon as it is often called. One of the great things about being a human is that most of us live in groups – families, rings of friendship, social organizations, neighborhoods and so on. That gives younger human beings one of the most valuable opportunities of all – being able to watch and learn from other peoples' successes (how *to do* things) and their failures (how *not to do* things). With all these people willingly making 'our' mistakes for us so we don't have to make them, watching and listening makes our lives much easier – more easily filled with successes and happiness, and far less likely to be filled with failure and unhappiness. The members of the generation that came before us provide that help even if they may seldom think about it. Since *they* do it for us, we probably need to be willing to pass on our experiences, our expertise about life, to the generation that follows us. One way or another you will – they are watching you – so it seems only fair to be the best models we can be.

Most books on Adolescent Psychology make a statement similar to this: *teenagers often believe they have to invent the wheel all over again.* That means that many teens reject the idea of learning about life and living it from their parent's generation who have already learned it. They mistakenly think of advice as '*orders based in old-fashioned ideas*' for how they must live their lives. Instead of listening to advice to see if it *might* hold some truth or importance – to thoughtfully evaluate it – they automatically turn it off without consideration, thereby squandering any insights or truths it might have provided. How, by any measure, is that smart?

If, in order to save your life, you were going to have to cross a wide, deep, windy canyon on a single rope strung across it, would it probably not be a good idea to first learn what you could from somebody who regularly did that? The wise person would listen, watch – practice, if he could – and then adapt what he learned to fit his or her own skills and style. It is *natural*, and in fact, laudable, to want to be in charge of oneself and one's future. It is *smart* to take time to learn from those around you so you don't fall on your face later in life. And who falls on their faces – often it is those who *don't* take the time to learn the lessons that mankind has already learned for you (they try to invent the wheel all over again). Remember, there is a whole generation – maybe two – out there ready to fall on their faces first, so you don't have to. It is a grand and potentially lifesaving 'play' for those who are willing – wise enough – to pause and watch.

Just one more time from a different angle: Let's say you are participating in a new game of skill – tossing rings over stick-like targets rising from a base. Each target is a different size and shape from the others – thin or fat, oval or triangular, tall or short. Each one moves in a different manner – leaning left and right, back and front, round and round, and so on. If you wanted the best chance to win, would you want to go first or last in your group? *Last*, of course, or at least toward the end, so you could watch the others and learn from their mistakes and successes – learn which targets never have a ring stick to them vs those that often do, or whether overhand or underhand tosses seem to be most successful, etc. Like in the game, successful and happy people, have spent time watching other people. They watch winners in life. They watch failures in life. Build your own *effective* set of 'being-my-own-person' skills based on careful observation. Pick and choose wisely. Everybody has a set of skills. Some work well and some don't work at all. Those who don't trust to luck, but, instead, go about the process of living in a thoughtful – watchful – manner, are almost always the winners.

Sometimes teenagers – like David – believe that they *should have* the answers and to demonstrate to others that they don't, puts them in a bad light. Successful lives are never born out of *should haves*. Successful lives are born out of careful observation and gathering good information from whatever reliable sources there are. During adolescence, it often becomes difficult to say, "I don't know". Two things about that: *One*, saying it, opens up the whole world of knowledge for you – 'I don't know SO who or what can help me find the answer'. *Two*, people who really count will respect you for saying that. They will gladly make themselves available to be of assistance and will respect you for asking. How can they know there is a need or desire if a person isn't able to say, 'I don't know'? Sometimes teens, who are afraid to say that, believe that asking others for help shouts out to the world, "I'm a big dummy", when, again, *to people who count*, it says they are wise enough to ask, rather than being satisfied to continue being ignorant and live a life based on chance. Teens who ask, gain the respect of people who matter. Who cares what the rest think!

Answering any question in life with, 'That's *probably* right,' or 'that *seems* to be the way to go,' without having taken time to learn the relevant facts, is the most dangerous way any human being can live his or her life. It is trusting to luck, pure and simple. Casinos are based on luck. Who almost always wins – the bettor or the casino? You got it – the casino. Successful, happy, people build their lives by gathering the best information available before venturing into *any* activity.

David understood that he was brilliant and creative. He figured he should be able to 'make himself' into something great all by himself. Up to a point in life, he had done that quite well. When people asked him for advice, he was pleased to give it, but he came to believe if he were to ask others, it would be a burden on them *and* a put down to him – because he should know. That became his blind spot – not understanding that most people were like he was, very willing to help others, and that truly 'wise' people asked for help when they needed it. Some of the best advice in life comes from the simple people who don't overthink things. Our 'advisors' don't have to be smarter than we are. Remember T.J.s, drop-out, dad's dad's advice: *Once said, said for always*, meaning you can really never take back something once you have said it so, always consider the possible long-range effects of what you are about to say. Wisdom is largely separate from high intelligence. Wisdom arises from a life well analyzed – observed, tried out, corrected, and tried again from some new angle, which new experiences suggest have a better chance of success.

David had developed a significant problem of perception. Since he was so bright and successful – and proud of those things – he took it as a personal failure to have to ask anybody else about anything – to ask his teachers, even. When asked, more often than not, his teachers would say that David often taught the class from his seat among the students. When his hand went up it was always to answer a question – never to ask one. As brilliant as he was, he didn't understand the value – the necessity – the normalcy – of asking for help. He read widely, but for some reason didn't count that as somebody (the author) helping him or advising him. That was a *misconsidered oversight*. He accepted a belief (that authors were not his teachers so learning from them wasn't a personal put down) without thinking it through or challenging it or trying to help it fit into the big picture he was painting of life and living it. Really, of course, as a reader, he had been taking help, gathering ideas, and receiving advice from others all his life and never taking it as a put down. Perhaps, in some ways, receiving advice face-to-face was uncomfortable for him.

Our human mind is the most competent, efficient, and precious natural thinking and feeling machine in our known universe. Even so, the human mind is not capable of finding or comprehending conclusive answers to some of man's most puzzling questions about life and the universe. Once we accept that limitation – regardless of the mind's over-all greatness – we can immediately breathe easier. If some answers are mentally or physiologically beyond our human abilities, we cannot, reasonably, blame ourselves when satisfactory answers don't come. That does not mean we may not need to continue the search, but only with the understanding that some questions will very likely remain out of our reach. (For example: If the universe has edges, how can it be that *nothing* – including empty space – exists beyond them?) It is a limitation of the human mind the mature person recognizes and for which he never faults himself.

We don't need to have all the answers to move ourselves forward and work to make our part of the world an improved, more comfortable, more helpful, more *altruistic* place in which to live and grow and teach and offer our skills and knowledge. It is always legitimate to say, 'I don't know', when you don't know. Those two things were possibly the biggest missing links in David's understanding of life and our reasonable, natural, human limitations for living it – do what you can, and don't fault yourself when things seem out of reach of your abilities.

That often-repeated suggestion – *take things one day, one obstacle at a time* – is good advice, so long as a person also has some flexible plan in mind about his or her life along which he can strive. (Eventually, I want to be a great doctor, teacher, parent, spouse, bus driver, scientist, biographer, historian, welder, building superintendent, farmer, office assistant, store associate, writer – just some generalized goal to hold like a carrot out in front of yourself. It may change as you grow and that's fine. New knowledge produces new possibilities.) That plan may be as simple as working toward being the finest human being one can be, or as complex as doing well in school so eventually you can study to become a teacher or scientist or doctor (or even a writer of books for young adults).

David's intelligence not only worked *for* him, it worked *against* him. It hadn't needed to – most brilliant people are well adjusted – they have more 'smarts' to help them understand the important elements of life and to help them solve obstacles to effective personal adjustment when they pop up. They understand when the time has come to ask for help. Tommy's faulty conception of his rightful role in the world (being the all-knowing planner and fixer for all people) fell apart when he allowed himself to become an island all to himself – separate from the influences and personal resources that surely were available all around him. Even in his final days, when his best friend tried to force himself into his life, David not only ignored the advice but rejected it – after all, it was coming from somebody other than himself, so it could not possibly be as good as his own.

Remember: David was wise for a 17-year-old, but it takes *seasoned adult wisdom* to solve the biggest problems of life. He seemed to have missed that because he didn't make good use of the wisdom available all around him – parents, grandparents, teachers, clergy (and maybe even, Aunt Suzy). He chose not to wait around to see what the psychologist might have had to offer him. Perhaps he believed that might prove he was inferior to that person. He chose to remain an island. That was undoubtedly partly the 'fault' of the adults in his life who allowed him to assume the role of 'boss of the school' – boss of his little world – without adequate monitoring. It was partly the 'fault' of his best friends – those who saw his pain and desperately wanted to help him – when they tried to depend on 17-year-old wisdom to handle problems that were still way above their pay grade (skill level). On several occasions, T.J. demonstrated that he had the right idea, but he wasn't able to follow through – cart him off to a shrink, walk with him to his minister, make him go home and talk with his dad. Sometimes, those adult folks who can help, need to be alerted so they can go to the young person – especially unrealistically 'self-sufficient' young people like David. ***Snitching is never a bad thing when it offers some good chance of saving a friend's life. And it is always better earlier than later.*** [The author was so fortunate that he had a best friend who snitched on him to his parents.]

In regard to building a good life for yourself, David hinted at one crucial idea. When you live among knowledgeable, well adjusted, happy, contented people who feel safe and have found ways to be productive so they can take care of themselves, life tends to be very good *for you*. When you live among people with the opposite traits (unhappy, maladjusted, etc.), life tends to be unpleasant or even hurtful *for you*. It only makes sense, then, for each of us to do what we can to help those around us (especially our family members) become and remain knowledgeable, well adjusted, happy, contented people who feel safe and have found ways to be productive and to take care of themselves. *About that, David was one hundred percent correct.* Asking yourself every night, “What have I done today to make life for those around me better,” can go a long way to keep you on the path toward building a better world in which *you* will live. As an additional, just-in-case-reminder, we probably also need to occasionally ask ourselves, “Have I done anything today that made life worse for anybody? If, so, what can I do about it?”

There is one, huge, final, *chunk of reality* many teens hate to hear. I am going to assume you are mature enough to hear it, to examine it fairly, and to profit from it. Just like the child’s brain is not ready to learn how to read efficiently until it approaches five to six years of growth and maturation, the human brain does not develop the skills necessary for ‘adult-sized-wisdom’ – *really good judgement* – until the early twenties. It is true that teens are full grown adults in many ways and, therefore, believe they should be recognized as such and have the rights and freedoms of adults. Some could leave home at fifteen and earn a living and in many other ways take care of themselves. Teens most certainly *should* be recognized for all the skills and talents they possess. The problem enters about *that wisdom and judgment thing*.

Making truly good judgements and decisions is a function of the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex in the brain (the part of the brain just behind the forehead – that part that soccer players use to impact highspeed balls and send them flying – hmm?). That portion of the brain is still considered immature – it is still developing – until the early twenties. It is one reason society has astutely decided teens – in their own best interest – need to stay at home where adult wisdom is available for them until they reach the point their brains are physiologically developed to the place they are mentally ready to make it – wisely – on their own. What sort of teen, knowing this, would not find ways of taking advantage of that information and social convention. This is not a putdown, you see. It is a *fact* of nature – a way of protecting precious young human beings. Those teens who understand and accept it have the very best chance of success during the first 20 some years of their lives. (And, in fact, the very best chance of surviving to experience their twenty-fifth birthday.) Our dear, loveable, precious David, missed that.

One final, interesting, challenge for the teenager to consider: not having the necessary, brain-based judgement capacity to understand he or she doesn't have an adequate portion of good judgement, he is prone to make the judgement that he DOES have it. Hmm?

On a personal note: For almost seventy years, I have been writing novels – most are for young people – with the goal of improving their lives and thereby improving the world – *solving its problems*. If you have taken time to look around your world, you just may have noticed that I have not succeeded in that goal – but I keep writing – doing what I can. You can ask nothing more of yourself, than that you find a niche – a role – in your world that feels right for you, and then use yourself in whatever ways you can to make your immediate world a better place for your fellowmen. (Remember, that usually assures a better life and place for *you*, as well.) I can think of no, acceptable role in our society that cannot be used to further the cause of right and truth and compassion and helpfulness – stock boy or doctor, clergyman or cab driver, TV anchor person or teacher, store clerk or writer, clergyman or shoe shiner, parent or teen, waitress or king of the world. Pursuing it can be as simple as flashing a smile at those you pass, or saying ‘Hi’ to strangers, or taking the new kid under your wing until he finds his own place at school or in the neighborhood, standing up against bullying, saying thank you and please and excuse me, recognizing others with words of reasonable praise for their positive accomplishments.

It can, of course, be more complex than that: help organize an ongoing ‘feed the hungry children’ campaign; see that isolated old folks have regular, upbeat, visitors (perhaps, organize a herd of teens and their checker boards); become an activist for your special cause; become politically active; feed or help build shelters for the homeless. The things you do to fix your little part of the world must never be considered *small* deeds – for those you help, it is often the *most important* deed ever offered them. (Remember David taking the new kid to eat with Sue and him and later those calls to him to make sure he was alright and offering the camping trip for his brother? Remember Jake’s reaction!)

We each have several basic decisions to make about the way we live our lives. Among them are these.

- Am I going to live mostly *for myself* – includes putting oneself first, being greedy, ignoring those in need, accumulating lots of *unnecessary* stuff or

power?

- Am I going to live for *all of us* – includes putting other peoples' needs at least on a par with my own (altruistic), being willing to forego things I really don't need in order to make certain those who are in genuine need have food and shelter and clothing and medicine and friendship and an education? (This certainly does not mean you must go without what you *need*.)
- Am I going to become and remain well informed (educated) so I can make accurate decisions, based on facts rather than unverified beliefs, gossip or lore? (The, 'I don't know so I'll search for factual answers' approach, rather than the, 'that sounds right so I'll just go with it' approach.)

As the author of this novel, my advice to you is two-fold (and I realize you haven't asked for it.). It is the same that I REALLY wish 'David' had been given early in his life:

First, make sure you TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF – have fun, keep healthy and fit, learn about things that are important to you and our planet, form positive relationships with people of a variety of ages and backgrounds, pace yourself according to time and stamina, become a dependable leader if that is your bent, or a thoughtful and responsible follower if that is where you shine.

Second, AS FREQUENTLY AND FULLY AS YOU ARE ABLE, GO OFFER YOUR WONDERFUL, UNIQUE, POSITIVE, CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE OTHER HUMANS IN YOUR PART OF THE WORLD!

(I'll check back with you in 70 years to see how things are going! As you can see, I am an optimist. In the end, David, was not. I have found being realistically optimistic *really* helps.)

THE END

(Well, I certainly hope not!)

LOOK FOR THE SEQUEL TO THIS STORY LATE SUMMER
2017

T.J. : a teen boy's search for himself