

1999

L.I.F.E.

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BY

OMAR MERIDETH HEADEN

1975-

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1999

YEAR

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ABSTRACT

I've written my creative thesis in support of the Chicago Public School (CPS) System's "Character Education" initiative. This initiative is composed of a teaching curriculum designed to develop instructional lessons and activities for students, training for teachers and CPS staff, and information for the community that will serve to reduce racial, ethnic and/or religious intolerance and increase sensitivity, cooperation, and understanding. The purpose of this thesis is to give teenage students valuable lessons in character building and allow them to come face to face with various realities of life (i.e., peer pressure, divorce, death, etc.). But more importantly, this thesis has given me an opportunity to utilize my creative abilities to share the results of my research in the areas of: 1) teenage pregnancy, 2) fraternity hazing, 3) parenting after divorce, 4) child abuse, and 5) gang affiliations.

I have created a total of five fictional works for this thesis. Each story is approximately 20 pages in length, written in first person, and told from the point of view of a teenage male student. After each story, the reader is supplied with a host of questions that require critical thinking and a thorough comprehension of the text. There is also a list of questions that pay particular attention to plot, characterization, and voice in each story.

The main thematic concern of this thesis is to elevate the consciousness of our society's youth—in regards to several issues that have been proven to have devastating effects on them. The concern is not to encourage more adults to assume responsibility for our children, but to provide young adults with a means to assess their own priorities,

choices, and purposes in life. Other thematic concerns include: 1) education reform, 2) violence by youth, 3) safer sexual intercourse, 4) abortion 5) crime, and 6) domestic violence, etc.

The first story is entitled On the Line. It explores the physical and psychological perils of domestic abuse. The main character not only has to deal with the pressures of being a high-school dropout, but he has to deal with his father's alcoholism and physical abuse on a daily basis. My inspiration for writing this story came from my experience reading Eve Krupinski and Dana Weikel's Death from Child Abuse and No One Heard.

The second story is entitled Brotherly Love. The hazing of students by college fraternities continues to be a problem in the United States. Despite harsher legal penalties and university sanctions, students still find the physical rigors of fraternity hazing to be both historical and necessary. The main character is an 18-year-old college student who finds himself trapped between his own moral/value system and the perils of fraternity hazing.

The third story is entitled In the Kitchen. There has been a lot of research devoted towards understanding the consequences of parental divorce on children's social behavior and well-being. This story features a high-school student who undergoes emotional and personal strife as a direct result of his parents' separation and divorce.

The fourth story is entitled The Red Cap. It features a conflicting relationship between two brothers who have chosen very different paths in life. The older sibling fails at making the most of his life, while the younger always seems to have a grasp on his ambitions—despite his learning disabilities. The theme of the story has to do with freedom of choice. As in many of Jim Welch's novels, this story ends quite ambiguously

in order for the reader to decipher what is to become of the main character. The conclusion falls somewhere between a melodrama and tragedy. Like Mary Wilkins Freeman, I've used narrative devices in this story that help provide additional perspectives on the development of the plot. I've also highlighted many societal stereotypes regarding gang violence in order to help my readers understand a facet of urban culture.

The fifth story is entitled Fools in Love. There is documentation that suggests adolescent men from poor socioeconomic conditions view paternity as a source of masculinity and self-esteem. These same men are more likely not to use effective contraceptive methods during sexual intercourse as well. The main character in this story is a high-school senior who must come to terms with his girlfriend's pregnancy.

My literary sources constitute a list of authors whose fiction has aided me in sharpening my character development. They have assisted me in discovering original but compelling ways in which to write various scenes—incorporating poetic imagery. Due to my fascination with Toni Morrison's use of symbolism, I have attributed symbolic meanings to various objects, events, and/or relationship in my fiction. My theoretical sources have provided me with valuable information on my subject matter.

In conclusion, this creative thesis confronts several pertinent issues that face teenage students from all walks of life. The results of my research is evident in each of the five stories, but no solutions are offered for the problems. This thesis functions as a creative tool for the purpose of reaching out to an adolescent audience.

To my mother, for her support and
unconditional love, and to my father,
for being the only role model I ever
needed.

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I wish to thank Dr. David Carpenter, my thesis director, for his patience, encouragement and insight. As a student of Dr. Carpenter's Advanced Fiction Writing course, I've learned how to combat many of the challenges I face when writing. As a result of his teachings, I have been working towards making the characters in my fiction more visible while not relying solely upon exposition to engage my readers. Dr. Carpenter has continuously showered me with the support I've needed to successfully complete this creative thesis.

I also wish to thank Dr. Michele Tarter and Dr. John Kilgore, my thesis committee members, for their individual contributions during this project. Dr. Tarter has served as my personal counselor, mentor and friend since I first enrolled in her Advanced Composition course. Her continued guidance and support has motivated me to pursue doctoral studies. Dr. Kilgore has inspired me to pursue my aspirations of becoming an author of children's literature. His technical precision has helped me tremendously as a graduate student.

Also, I wish to thank Tamika Williams for encouraging me to pursue my academic dreams. I am grateful to her for the sacrifices she's made in order for me to develop a creative thesis I can be proud of.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction.....	viii
<u>L.I.F.E.</u>	1
“On the Line”	2
“Brotherly Love”	22
“Inside the Kitchen”	46
“The Red Cap”	64
"Fools in Love"	94
Bibliography.....	115

INTRODUCTION

“Those who sweat in time of peace bleed less in time of war!”
(-Unknown)

I first read the following words six years ago when I attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. I was a freshman student waiting in line to receive my textbooks, when I spotted this passage stapled to a bulletin board inside one of the university’s student recreational centers. Since then, I have carried these words close to my heart because they continue to inspire me to develop my writing skills and search for truth. These words empower me with encouragement to become an agent of social change rather than a victim. I feel it is imperative for students to take advantage of educational opportunities because some opportunities may be unavailable for them in times of crisis.

My passion for investigative research began with my pursuit of a B.A. in Journalism. Through my academic coursework and involvement with campus newspapers, I’ve learned to appreciate the thrill of self-discovery, as well as acknowledge the need to be published. As an aspiring educator, I plan to encourage students to explore multiple approaches to common difficulties and tasks. This collection of fiction is my personal attempt at combating some of the issues that continue to challenge today's youth. Although my writing does not offer solutions for these issues, it does offer a creative means for self-reflection.

The title for my collection of short stories is L.I.F.E. I chose this title because each of my five stories deals with a portion of the tribulations affecting today’s youth. Furthermore, L.I.F.E. is an acronym for Lessons In Familial Experiences. L.I.F.E.

explores the effects of familial disruption due to alcoholism, domestic violence, divorce, unplanned pregnancy, and other problems. But ultimately, L.I.F.E. supports the need for families to foster a strong sense of personal and academic growth for teenage males.

Each story is written in the first person. My fascination with first-person narration came years ago after I read Lee Harper's To Kill A Mockingbird. I've always admired how Scout's voice was used throughout the novel to emphasize the gradual separation from her segregated society. But I was first inspired to write this creative thesis after reading Robert Jackson's book entitled Inside of Me. Jackson's book was written for young-adult readers and consists of a collection of short stories and poems in which the main character is faced with some sort of moral/ethical dilemma. After each story, the author supplies his readers with a host of questions that require critical thinking and a thorough comprehension of his text. Like Jackson, I have also supplied my readers with a complete list of questions that will help insure that they pay attention to plot, characterization, and voice. The questions are located at the conclusion of each story.

The sequence of each fictional work in this collection of fiction was determined by the degree of physical and psychological pain the main character has to endure. The main character in the first two stories, "On the Line" and "Brotherly Love," has more physical obstacles to hurdle than the main character in the following three stories. In the third story, "In the Kitchen," the main character has an equal number of physical and psychological issues to contend with. In the last two stories, "The Red Baseball Cap" and "Fools in Love," the main characters have to battle more psychological pain than physical pain.

In "On the Line," Nathan, the main character, not only has to deal with the

pressures of being a high-school dropout, but with his father's alcoholism and physical abuse. My inspiration for writing this story came from my experience reading Eve Krupinski and Dana Weikel's Death of a Child and No One Heard. In this shocking story, a young girl named Ursula Sunshine Assaid suffers unimaginable horrors from her abusive guardian. Like Krupinski and Weikel, I work to make this story as compelling as possible by paying special attention to characterization, voice, and point-of-view. As James Welch does in his novels, I have set up the main character's various strategies of survival as powerful acts rejecting a dominant culture. Both Nathan's father and grandfather were abusive to their wives. And Nathan acknowledges the fact that he has already adopted a similar pattern of alcohol abuse. Danielle Steele's The Long Road Home is another novel that has fascinated me with the issue of domestic violence. I have attempted to develop scenes as shocking and powerful as Steele's through Nathan's episodes in a train station.

The hazing of students by college fraternities continues to be a problem in the United States. Despite harsher legal penalties and university sanctions, students still find the physical rigors of fraternity hazing to be both historical and necessary. Many critics of hazing argue that society should stop blaming the victims of incidents involving hazing and impose harsher penalties upon fraternity members. One 1997 report confirmed that at least 70 college students have died as a result of beatings and stress inflicted during fraternity initiation ceremonies. "Brotherly Love" examines the role of group psychology and the importance to the individual of being accepted into a new family. Malcolm, the main character, goes through a conversion that includes relinquishing his past beliefs and values and assuming new ones (along with a new

identity). The story begins in 1995 at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. During the first week of school, Booker, a member of Alpha Alpha Fraternity, comes to speak to Malcolm's freshman seminar about the importance of getting involved on campus. Throughout the week, Booker does a host of things to gain the trust of the freshman students who appear to be the most attentive during his presentation. Before long, Booker has a group of thirty freshman males (including Malcolm) frequenting his fraternity house every day after school. By the end of the story, a couple of the males become members of Booker's fraternity; but most never want to hear the words "Alpha Alpha" again.

"In the Kitchen" features a high-school student who undergoes strife as a direct result of his parents' separation and divorce. Throughout the story, the main character tries to deal with the pain of "losing" his father. But as he attempts to fill the void in his life, his academics suffer while his social life deteriorates. There has been a lot of research devoted to understanding the consequences of parental divorce, in terms of children's social behavior and psychological health. This story addresses several of these consequences while illustrating the importance of nurturing one's child during the adolescent years. Jason is a 16-year-old from Chicago, Illinois. He has always shared a bond with his father that his mother refuses to understand. As Jason strips himself from everyone and everything he used to have feelings for, he finds the love he desperately needs elsewhere. At the conclusion of the story, Jason attempts to run away from home. This scene is pertinent because it supports documentation concerning the reasons why adolescents who experience parental divorce are more susceptible to leaving their homes. Like many of Jim Welch's novels, this story ends quite ambiguously in order for the

reader to decipher what is to become of Jason. I have created a conclusion that falls somewhere between melodrama and tragedy.

"The Red Cap" features a conflicting relationship between two brothers who have always chosen very different paths in life. Although Terry (the older) is the more intelligent sibling, he fails at making morally right choices, while Timothy always seems to make intelligent decisions, despite his learning disabilities. When Timothy gets shot in the spine because a gang member mistakes him for Terry, Terry has to deal with the pain of knowing he is to blame for his brother's paralysis.

Throughout this story, I have paid close attention to structure and form. I have referred back to how Stephen King uses structure and form to build suspense in almost all of his novels. For example, in his thriller Misery, King was able to capture frightening realities of life through Annie Wilkes' manic-depressive tendencies. The theme of this particular story is a simple one: freedom of choice. Both teenagers make decisions that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. But like Mary Wilkins Freeman, I have used narrative devices in this story that will provide additional perspectives on the development of the plot. In Freeman's "A Church Mouse," Hetty's sunflower quilt functioned as a means to move the story from teller to receiver. I have used a similar method to give a voice to both male characters. In the beginning of the story, the tent functions as a symbol for intimacy as well as a sanctuary for the two brothers. I have also highlighted many societal stereotypes regarding gang violence in order to help my readers understand a facet of urban culture.

My literary sources constitute a list of authors and their fiction that have aided me in sharpening my character development. They have also assisted me in discovering

original but compelling ways in which to write various scenes, incorporating poetic imagery. The author who I admire most is Toni Morrison. Time and its relationship to the past plays an important role in her fiction. She also uses historically-based fiction as a medium for addressing her personal concerns. In Beloved, Morrison writes about the traumas and healing powers of memory. Sethe's past becomes the narrative as her memories are brought to the surface and then repressed. I have emulated this wavelike narrative effect in "The Red Baseball Cap" by illustrating how Terry's memories of his past have scarred his future.

Symbolism is an integral component of Morrison's fiction. Her work has a striking number of messages hidden within some exceptionally rich language. Due to my fascination with her use of symbolism, I have attributed symbolic meanings to various objects, events, and relationships in my fiction. In Beloved, Morrison portrayed the mother and child relationship as a form of ownership. She emphasizes the spiritual, emotional, and psychological link between nursing and mothers, and she symbolizes "thick love" as a mother's milk. A child is usually owned by his or her mother since the mother has given birth to it and nurtures it. But Morrison recaptures the inhumanity of slavery by telling a story of how even a slave mother can own nothing—neither the child she gave birth to nor the milk in her own breasts. Although my fiction does not go so far as to use breast milk to symbolize "thick love," I have used symbolism to "show" instead of "tell" what I am trying to convey—especially in "Fools in Love" and "The Red Baseball Cap." For example, the motorcycle that Jason becomes attached to in "In the Kitchen" symbolizes the void in his life that his father once filled.

Terry McMillan is another author who has inspired me to write about real-life

experiences. Due to her recent success with Waiting to Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back, the publishing industry may compare her to Danielle Steele and Judith Krantz. But I believe McMillan's work compliments Toni Morrison's—because it mirrors life and contributes to the exploration of African-American families. And like Morrison, she also reinforces a belief that women can fulfill roles that have been traditionally appropriated by men. McMillan is inspirational to me because her writing focuses more on successful storytelling than realistic surface details. She tends to spend more of her energy focusing on plot and resolution than on setting and characterization.

My theoretical sources have provided me with valuable information on my subject matter, and I have used heuristics as a tool in generating descriptive and narrative materials. While using the Roman Jakobson Diagram as a crutch, I have not attempted to adapt to my audience (young adults). Instead, I have provided cues that I want my readers to adopt through responding to my text.

In conclusion, L.I.F.E. confronts several pertinent issues that face teenage students from all walks of life. Although the results of my research are evident in each of the five stories, I have not offered solutions for the problems. I have simply found a creative means to reach out to an adolescent audience. Lessons in Familial Experiences is a collection of fictional works designed to provide teenagers with an opportunity to confront in fiction some of the issues their generation faces on a daily basis.

L.I.F.E.

A Collection of Fictional Works

By
Omar Merideth Headen

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On the Line

I've always stood close to the edge-- waiting for the blinding light to smile at me from the opposite side of the tunnel. The steel tracks gave me hope that there was a place that even Dad could not find me. The headlights reminded me of all the nights I prayed for the sun to end the nights rage. Who would've thought that you could find peace in the pit of a subway station? But it's perfect. You know. It's pretty quiet for exactly twenty minutes and just when you begin to think too much, another train races through the tunnel and carries off your memory. I like to go about two in the morning, when I'm sure that the homeless are settling into their fetal positions for the night, and nobody gives a fuck that I'm standing too close to the edge talking to myself...

Shit. It's pretty cold in this drafty cave lit by flickering neon lights and unextinguished cigarette butts. But this half pint of Seagram's sure goes down warm. Dad used to come looking for me at night, but I guess he figured out that a little brisk air can keep the swelling down. Man, has he changed. He used to take me to the park to play basketball. We would wear matching Chicago Bulls jerseys with the number "23" stamped on our chests. He would slide his palms under my pits and elevate me to the net. And I flew! Forget Jordan, I was Air Brandon... the only five-year-old in the neighborhood who could soar in the air from the free-throw line to the hoop (and live to tell the story).

Now, I refuse to wear jerseys, or even tank-tops for that matter. Jerseys remind me of the times I really felt like I had a Dad. Tank-tops remind me of the uniform Dad usually wore when he beat Mom. You know those tight-ass sleeveless T-shirts the kids call "Wife-beaters"-- because every movie with a domestic-violence episode featured a beer-bellied husband who wore one around the house. Dad had a lot of them. Most were

stained with blood, though...

Pssssss, it's painful to feel your chocolate skin melt from your limb and to witness your own flesh bubble on the outside of a pot that your mother had boiling on the stove. "I'm tired of comin' home to this shit, woman," Dad screamed at Mom just as I peeped in the kitchen and witnessed his talons sink deeper and deeper into her tender neck. I swallowed long and hard before jumping onto the back of the raging bull. I didn't bite, kick, punch or scream at Dad. I just rode on his back like a cowboy as he bucked and cursed me. After Dad pried my arms from around his neck, I squeezed my knees tighter around his ribs and used his pants pockets for stirrups. But Dad's breath-taking elbow to my mid-section quickly dismounted me on top of the stove. "Noooo, don't hurt him," Mom screamed. "It's not his fault... please!" Fortunately, my body landed between the four burners on the stove. But as soon as I moved, my shoulder stuck to the boiling pot of potatoes like oatmeal would stick to your ribs on a cold winter morning. When I ripped my flesh from the pot, it sizzled like bacon.

Dad beat Mom something awful that night, and that was the last night I saw her. I'm glad Mom finally escaped because Dad would have killed her eventually (if not physically, mentally for sure). Even though it has been years since I've seen or heard from her, I know she'll be back for me because we'd talked about the situation many times before... after Dad would pass out on the living-room sofa. I was ten years old the last time Mom sat at the foot of my bed and talked to me about leaving Dad. I remember how Mom's body was cut in half by the moonlight that invaded my bedroom window-- so when she spoke I could see the sincerity in only one of her eyes and witness the truth in only half of her lips. I remember her calloused hands touching my cheek as I compared

the bloody bruises on her arm with red hearts of love that Dad didn't know how to express properly. I remember hearing the hibernating bear snore on the couch downstairs, as Mom whispered to me softly: "Baby, I want you to remember that both your Daddy and Mommy love you a lot. You know that your Daddy's not well, and hasn't been well for a long time. Every time he gets laid off from work' cause of his back, he starts drinking the 'Devil's water' again. And all that alcohol just infects his mind with devils. I want you to know that one day I may have to leave you and your Daddy behind for a while... Now, now, now, you know you're too big to even act like you're gonna think about cryin.' Just listen to me. Maybe your Daddy gets real mad sometimes because it's too hard for him to find enough work to feed the both of us-- and him too. If I leave for a little while, maybe he won't feel so bad about hisself and I can find a job to help him out, O.K.? I know you want to come along, but you may not have nowhere to rest when you're sleepy, or food to eat when you're hungry, if you come with me. And besides, you have to stay in school so you can be the first one in our family to goes to college, yah hear? Don't you worry none, everything'll be all right. Shhhh, everything'll be all right."

Yeah, I know it sounds like a hell of a lot to remember for eight years. But I do. I remember those exact words like I just heard them a second ago. And, man, did Dad change after Mom was gone the following morning. I mean, he stopped drinking when he thought something had happened to her. Either that or he didn't have time to drink, after looking for her for hours each day after work. But after he got the letter from her explaining why she had to leave him, his drinking not only resumed; it escalated. I used to sit in my room at night and try to think about the good times I'd shared with both Mom

and Dad. But now, I come here every day and stare down this dark tunnel-- waiting for the blinding light to come take away the pain.

Humph, right on time... exactly twenty minutes bringing along the same bright smile. It's a noisy entrance; but no noisier than the chaos at home. I live for the moments when the train passes directly in front of me. The wind jerks my head backward as the flying sparks awaken me from my zone. I guess a gust of wind under anyone's pants leg would snap 'em back to reality...

I hated Dad for what he used to do to Mom. But I still love him 'cause he is my dad. He just needs some help, you know? And that's why I stopped going to school. Not because I didn't want to go to college and become the man that Mom always wished Dad could be. I stopped because it's too hard. It was too hard praying for Mom's return each morning, going to school all day, and then avoiding Dad on the nights he chooses me for his human punching bag. So I walk this yellow line that stretches all the way to the opposite end of the cave. Exactly four feet to my left, there's nowhere to go but down—down onto the cold steel rails that tickle each train's belly. But to my right, there's no place to go but past the turnstile, up the escalator, and back home. Guess I'll stick around here a little longer-- at least until this bottle is finished and the trains stop running for the night.

Things used to be so much simpler before Dad's accident. We never had much-- but we were a family. When I would come home from school each day, Mom would fix me a quick snack while I changed into my play clothes: "O.K. Nathan, just one more cookie. Then you have to get started on your homework you hear?" Every Saturday

morning when Mom did the laundry, she'd question why I had so many crumbs in my pants pockets. But she never figured out that I always managed to sneak a couple of extra Oreos when she turned her back to water the plants. I loved doing my homework on the kitchen table. I never had to open the dictionary Dad bought me, 'cause Mom always helped me sound out the hard words while she chopped, diced, and spiced on the old cutting board Grandma bought her as a wedding gift. She used to get upset when I watched her cook instead of doing my homework. So I'd wear my baseball cap so she couldn't see my eyes following her from the sink, to the counter, to the stove, and then back to the sink again.

By 5:45 p.m., I would convince Mom that my homework was finished and I hadn't stained my assignments with food from the kitchen table. For some reason, Mom had some kind of complex about me handing in assignments that were wrinkled or stained. She always told me the work I handed in was a representation of myself, and every time I represented myself it was a reflection on her and Dad-- or something like that. I have about one hundred quotes swimming in my head that Mom probably made up a couple of seconds before she would make me memorize them. Anyway, I had to have my homework finished by 6:00 p.m. when Dad would come home. The backs of my thighs used to sweat on the plastic that smothered our living room sofa when I stared out of the window waiting for the green Volkswagen to bring him home safely. And it always did. It would pull up slowly to the curb and close its "bug" eyes after Dad pulled up the emergency brake lever. Dad always got out of the car on the passenger's side because his door stopped working right after that woman sideswiped him down on 12th Street.

Mom nicknamed me “Spot” and I hated it. She said it was the name of the Dalmatian she had growing up that would wait in the window for her to come home when she was a little girl. When Dad would make it to the top step, I’d open the door and attempt to run past him—pretending I just so happened to be on my way out: “Ahhhh no you don’t little man. Get on back in this house so we can get some of your momma’s good old cookin. Hey, wait a minute... Did you finish your homework yet?” I can see myself now, carrying Dad’s lunchbox while he gives me a piggyback ride into the kitchen...

“Martin, don’t you bring Nathan in here with all that monkey business,” Mom would say. “Now get on out of here and wash your hands for dinner.” Dad would pucker his lips and whisper into Mom’s mouth before we “gid-dee-uped” to the washroom to wash our hands for dinner. I liked washing my hands in the sink with Dad. The bar of Irish Spring would do somersaults in my palms as the warm water washed away the rich lather Dad and I made—together. Sometimes, Dad would even rub the lather on my face and I would practice shaving with my toothbrush. “Short, soft strokes,” Dad would remind me. “Short, soft strokes.” I would watch him in the mirror and imitate his every move. I loved the way the bristles felt as they tickled my Adam’s apple, and I loved how shiny and smooth Dad’s face felt when I slapped on his aftershave lotion for him.

Supper wasn’t the only time we bonded as a family; but it was the only time we shut the outside world off. Dad unplugged the television set, Mom turned the ringer on the phone off, and I pulled the dining-room curtains closed. In our special triangle, we would hold hands and close our eyes, and I would give thanks to God for blessing the three of us with the wonderful meal Dad paid for and Mom prepared: “Bless us O Lord,

and these our gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ our Lord... Amen!" Whenever we ate dinner, I felt as if I were the turkey on Thanksgiving Day. The look in my parents' eyes told me they were both surprised at how well I turned out and pleased there was enough of me to go around. Mom's praises went on for the entire length of dinner. I can hear her now...

"Nathan, do you know how big you're getting?"

No, but I'm sure you'll tell me, Ma.

"You're growing like a weed, boy. Do you know what eating vegetables does to you?"

No, but I'm sure you'll give me the answer to that one too, Ma.

"You're gonna grow up big and strong like your daddy. Pretty soon, they'll be calling to Popeye the sailor at school."

Yeah right, Mom, let's see if we can get just a little more cornier.

And my father. The questions never seemed to end. He would ask me about school, Boy Scouts, music lessons, karate practice, and my chores at one time—and then answer the questions himself! With a mouth stuffed with mashed potatoes or peas he would say something like, "So, Nate, is that math teacher still kicking your butt? I hope not, since I have to keep paying for you to take those karate lessons. And what about your Boy Scout badges? It's been over a year, and you haven't been promoted to black belt, rainbow belt, Big Brother Scout... nothing. I hope you're gonna show me what my money's been going to soon!"

I would just shake my head and let the old bald-headed guy amuse himself with his own sarcasm. I knew he loved me. After dinner, he would sit with me at the kitchen

table and check my homework. No matter how tired he was, I could always persuade him to show me a couple of new karate moves before I went to bed. Dad never showed me any moves I didn't already know, but I never let him know that. I kind of enjoyed it when he had flashbacks from when he used to compete in martial arts tournaments when he was my age.

He would hop around my bedroom on his toes, fanning the air with all sorts of unorthodox moves that I'd only seen on those old Samurai and Ninja movies. And his Bruce Lee imitations were horrible. For an old guy who couldn't even touch his toes while keeping his knees straight, he sure did attempt some pretty high kicks that usually sent him to bed with a sore back. Dad had problems with his back for as long as I could remember. But after our karate matches, he would rest himself on the floor right beside my bed.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm all right," Dad would say. "I just need to stretch on out here on the floor. Ahhhh... uhmmm... now that's better." He told me the floor was good for the back. So when he would start snoring, I would grab the comforter from my bed and lie right beside him on the hard polished wood. But every morning when I awoke, I found myself back in my bed wrapped in my comforter like a burrito. I would kind of remember floating in mid air as he kissed my forehead, but it always seemed like a dream.

Weekends were great. Mom and Dad would always reward me for just being me by taking me out to the movies or even to dinner. I liked going to horror movies because Mom didn't have the stomach for it. But I liked watching Jackie Chan films the most because Dad would make his Bruce Lee noises in the movie theater-- just to make me

laugh. Mom used to get embarrassed whenever Dad made those crazy chants. She would pinch him in the dark and hope he didn't spill the buttery popcorn all over himself.

Ahhh, guess it's that time again. Listen. Listen how the rumble gets louder and louder as the light brightens. Listen to how the steel rails make the train squeal. Just close your eyes and listen to how its body echoes off the walls of the tunnel as the thunder drowns the contagious coughs and breaking booze bottles the homeless have grown accustomed to hearing. Listen to me talk about a father who doesn't exist anymore. Listen to how the sweat from my hands makes this bottle squeak. Tell me how it sounds when the mouth of this bottle touches my lips. Gone again. –Just as fast as it came. It takes away one memory, only to invite another one to hop aboard...

It was the first weekend in April when Dad and I found the ladder buried in the garage. It had at least a dozen Hefty Bags filled with clothes that we were supposed to donate to the Salvation Army smothering it, but it was in good shape. Mom told Dad not to worry about putting the new window screens up because she didn't have time to hold the ladder for him. But Dad told her he was either going to do it now or never. He also reassured her I was the only help he needed: "My boy's here to hold the ladder for his 'ol Daddy. You just stop your fussin'." Dad taught me how to hold the ladder with both hands and position my toes so it wouldn't slip: "Always look up when you're spotting me," he said. "I could accidentally drop this storm-window on your head and you wouldn't even see it coming, Nathan."

We put new window screens in four windows before I told Dad I needed to run inside the house to use the washroom. He asked me if I could wait until he finished fastening the hooks to the burglar bars in the window, but I really had to go bad. When

he told me I could go, I didn't think twice. I didn't think that Dad was at the top of the ladder with no one to secure the bottom. I didn't think that my two-minute absence could result in disaster. But as I lathered my hands in the bathroom sink, alone, I remembered I'd left Dad by himself. I raced out of the house as fast as I could, but the slamming of the door to our front porch must have startled him because I looked him straight in his eyes as he tried to regain his balance.

He always said it happened very fast. But I remember the fall frame by frame. It was like watching a video in slow motion. As he turned his head in my direction, the window slipped from his right hand. I guess he'd forgotten that he was standing on a ladder because as soon as he reached for the window with his left hand, there was little he could do to stop his descent. He fell hard. And I knew it was my fault. I also knew that sleeping on the floor next to my bed would not cure his ailment. He laid there for some time... under the window ledge, under the broken window screen, under my tears, but on top of the ladder that had been buried in the garage. Dad was in the hospital for at least a month. I remember because the guilt kept me from visiting him for the first two weeks. Of course I went to the hospital. I didn't have much of a choice. But Mom didn't make me go into the room to see him. The first time I went in to visit him was the day after I received the letter he had Mom write for him (since it hurt him to move)...

Nate,

Your mother told me you feel you are to blame for my accident. That's not true Nate. I was trying to do that backwards flip we watched on "Enter the Dragon." But I guess I over-rotated or something. Maybe when I get outta here we can practice the

move in the grass. I don't think I'll be climbing any more ladders for a while.

You know, I've been thinking about where we're gonna go for our summer vacation! I was thinking either Wisconsin Dells or Wisconsin Dells. Stop on by so we can plan everything out.

Missing you,

Dad

I knew he was just trying to make me feel better, but it worked! He always knew how to make things better—or at least appear to be. But when he finally came home from the hospital, things took a turn for the worse. He refused to lie in the bed and rest like the doctors said and even canceled his physical-therapy sessions that he was supposed to attend twice a week. His only concern was getting back to work at the construction site. It wasn't long before he was laid off work and the bills began to become unmanageable. I remember Mom begging him to let her work until he got back on his feet, but he refused to hear of such a thing. When I was younger, I thought Dad was just being a gentleman. But today, I know he was just trying to save his pride. Before long, he had to sell the Volkswagen just so he could provide for me and Ma... that's when his drinking first began. He went to apply for jobs every morning but only received phone calls from employers who were offering minimum wage. Dad had worked too long and hard to end up working for pennies. Well, at least that's what Mom used to say.

At first, he coped pretty well with the situation. We would still get ready for

dinner at the same time, and he still checked my homework before I went to bed. But something happened. The laughter in the house started to disappear and everything I treasured began to drift further away from me. Before long, I didn't want to go to the window at 6 p.m. because I was sure to find Dad staring out the living-room window waiting for the phone to ring. He usually had a can of Budweiser in his hand that he would finish at dinner. I knew early on Dad was suffering from more than his back pains. There was something going on inside of him he didn't share with me. He stopped shaving before dinner; but I didn't. I thought if I continued our tradition that he would miss it sooner or later. Sooner never came. Later came soon. When we ate at the table, we still held hands and prayed together. But the dinner conversations became limited. There was always a television program Dad wanted to finish watching while we ate. Mom continued her usual questioning session, but Dad 's input consisted of a grunt here or there, followed by an occasional belch. He would excuse himself from the table before Mom brought out the desert and head for the refrigerator for another Bud Light.

I guess the Buds were too light for him, because he quickly moved up to stronger drinks. He replaced the aluminum cans he used to squeeze in the living room (while he waited for his potential employers to call) with a glass that was always full of ice and half full of a brown liquid. I used to ask him what he was drinking and he would say, "Iced tea!" But when I asked him if I could have a glass he would tell me "No" because he didn't want me to spoil my dinner. I knew whatever he was drinking was no good because I could smell the alcohol as it seeped through his pores. Mom even stopped giving him those smooches before dinner. Every time Dad would try to kiss her, she would turn her head and pretend she'd accidentally made him miss her lips. And his

eyes. Dad's eyes were so glassy they looked at though they were ready to burst. But I knew they wouldn't tear. I'd never seen Dad cry before-- at least not before he found the note Mom left for him under the magnet on the refrigerator.

I had already prepared myself for the day I would come home from school and Mom would be gone. I figured she wouldn't tell me exactly when she would leave because it would be too hard on both of us. But as soon as I keyed into the house after school, I knew she was gone. Dad was asleep on the couch, the television already turned off, and dinner was on the table-- piping hot! There was a vase filled with freshly cut daisies and carnations directly in front of the plate Mom had prepared for me. She had cut me a huge slice of lasagna and even had my French bread roll already buttered. She also salted and peppered my corn-on-the-cob and put one carrot next to it—she knew I hated cooked carrots! I sat at the table alone and thanked God for giving Mom the courage to leave: “Bless us O’Lord and these our gifts... God, I just want to thank you for taking Mom away from here. Please protect her and watch over her, and just don’t let anything happen to her, all right! Help me help Dad so when Mom comes back everything’ll be like it used to be. O.K.? Make Dad’s back stronger and make him stop drinking so much. He doesn’t mean to do the things he does. He’s just sick, you know? Hmmm, thanks for this meal. Amen.” When I opened my eyes and separated my palms, Dad lifted himself from the sofa and stumbled to the washroom. He didn’t close the door behind him; but he did flush the toilet. He didn’t wash his hands; but he dried them off on the pink cotton towel Mom had hanging on the hook by the sink.

“Dinner’s ready?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, I thought you were asleep so I decided to...”

“Since when does this here fam-mi-ly start eating because someone’s happens to fall asleep?”

“Well...”

“Well, hell, I pay all the bills and only ask to be able to eat dinner with my love-ly wife and greedy son who wants to eat everything up before his old man can even get to the table for a decent meal. Nadine, do you see this boy in here fixin’ to eat without the rest of the fam-mi-ly?”

I didn’t notice the letter with Dad’s name on the front before he opened the freezer door to get a few ice cubes. If I had seen it just moments earlier, I’m sure I would’ve trashed it before Dad got a hold of it. I never had a chance to read the actual letter; but I know whatever Mom said, Dad wasn’t ready to hear it. As he placed the empty ice tray on the kitchen counter he spotted his message, removed the magnet, and unfolded the creases. As he read it, his eyebrows met while his jaw trembled violently—right before the glass filled with ice cubes shattered on the kitchen floor.

I immediately rushed into my bedroom and closed the door behind me. Whenever Dad squeezed his eyes tight while covering his forehead with clenched fist, an eruption was guaranteed to follow. I was used to his spontaneous fits of rage by this time, and I’d learned I was better off out of sight when he felt the urge to punch something or someone.

The storm lasted for 20 minutes. I remember because I timed it with the Timex Dad bought me for Christmas. When I heard the front door slam shut, I came out to witness the aftermath.

Everything was in shambles. I mean everything. Everything made of glass or

porcelain was broken—except for the chilled bottle of Jack Daniel’s that sweated between the plastic-covered cushions of the living room sofa. Every picture on the mantle had been ripped out of its frame. —Every picture except the one of all three of us outside of the chapel in Las Vegas. Dad held Mom in his arms and I squeezed that little pillow Mom’s ring was pinned to tighter than I used to embrace my Incredible Hulk Doll.

Can you feel that? It’s coming again... right on fuckin’ schedule. I feel the trembling of my chest as the vibrations steadily increase. Which side of the yellow line do I want to walk? A little to the left, or a little to the right... Wheew, that was windy. Good thing I didn’t wear my hat. Guess I’ll set this bottle down for a minute...

See, Dad? It’s just that easy. Just drink enough to get you numb, then set it to the side—like me. But you couldn’t do that. You drank till you forgot who you were and who you loved. Like the time I cut my throat with your razor. I was just a kid. I just wanted my skin to feel like yours, ya know? Even then, I realized you warned me never to touch your razors, but I didn’t think it would hurt anything. When I ran into the kitchen with blood trickling onto my T-shirt, I thought you would understand. I thought you would put down your glass and stop me from bleeding. But you didn’t. I thought you would wash my sore and dab some hydrogen peroxide on it with a Q-tip-- like you did the week you took my training-wheels off my bike and I kept falling. But when you soaked that paper towel in your glass and wiped the blood from my neck, it burned. Then you pinched my arm hard, and sent me to bed without dinner.

I didn’t go to sleep that night until after you finished cursing at Mom for not raising me right. When the sunlight struck my face the following morning, my arm was

bruised, my stomach empty, and my pillow stained with my own blood. I know you apologized for it all, but how many times can you apologize before I stop believing that you're sorry.

But you know what? Maybe you are sorry. Maybe you're sorry for all of the things you said about Mom the night she left you. But maybe you're not. Maybe you were too drunk to remember I was in my room when you called her a bitch. Maybe you are sorry for screaming you only married Mom because I was born. Oh, let's not stop here. I guess you're also sorry for beating me with the same extension cord you used to paint welts all over Mom's body when she accidentally shrank your favorite shirt, right? Like you, dressed in a stained tank-top and blue jeans, would actually miss wearing a Ralph Lauren Polo. I just wanted to get you off of her. I only broke the television set because I knew it was the only thing you paid any attention to anymore. But you, you struck me in the face. Mom told me I didn't have to go to school for the next couple of days because she feared what my teachers would do if I came to school with my face like that.

And the dishes. What about the time you came in my room in the middle of the night and pounded my face with your knuckles because the kitchen was a mess. I tried to explain I'd gotten home late from work, but you wouldn't listen. When you grabbed my ankles and drug me out of the bed, my head hammered the floor. But you still wouldn't even give me a chance to explain.

"There's no way you're gonna stay in my goddamn house and not pull your weight," I remember you repeating over and over between the punches. "You're gonna wash every damn dish in this kitchen, or get the hell out of here. If you don't like the

rules, do like you mother did and leave. “

“B-b-b-but, Dad,” I yelled—before your sweaty palm landed on my right cheek.

“No. I don’t wanna hear any of your excuses. Just wash those damn dishes, boy. And turn off my lights. You’re not gonna run up my electricity because you choose to break my rules.”

I’ve tried to help you. Lord knows I have. But there’s only so much I can do. I give you almost all of my money each payday to help out with the bills. But depending on your mood on any given day, you’ll either praise me for contributing to the household or beat me for insinuating you’re incapable of supporting the two of us. I can’t stand it. I hate living with you. I hate what you have become, Dad. So as I stumble back and forth not feeling a thing, I wonder what my purpose is.

Obviously, Mom’s not coming back (at least not anytime soon). And I don’t blame her. What is there to come back to... a drunk and abusive husband who works until his back gives out on him, and a high-school drop-out son who’s the reason behind his father’s unemployment? The way things are going, Dad and I will probably end up living down in a subway like this one in about five years— trying to get some rest while some drunk fool who doesn’t know how good he has it stumbles back and forth across the platform, talking himself out of self-pity at 2 o’clock in the morning. Hold up, guess I might as well finish off this bottle of Seagrams, huh? I wouldn’t want Dad to think I was a quitter. I wonder what He’s doing right about now. I bet he doesn’t even know I’m gone.

Yesterday, during the middle of our argument, I came here for almost two hours before I went back home. I thought Dad would be asleep when I returned, but I heard the

ice clinking inside his glass as soon as I opened the front door.

“Hmmm. Hmmm. Welcome back, Carter! You think you can just mosey on in here anytime you please? Huh? Do you think when things go wrong you can just up and walk away from it all-- like your mother? I’ll tell you what, you can run but you can’t hide. One day that chip on your shoulder’s gonna smack you right in the face. Do you here me? Nathan...”

Once I closed my bedroom door, his chatter was muffled and I had time to think again. I spread myself on top of my comforter and thought about what I needed to do to escape the situation I was in. I loved Dad, but not enough to let his ways continue to eat me alive. So I squeezed my eyes tight and begged God to give me a way out today. Well, this day is over and it’s about time for me to start back home. But not before I walk this yellow line one last time...

There’s no pain and definitely no worries as I spread my arms and walk on the left side of the yellow line. The breeze kisses my face as the rumbling of the cave’s floor wobbles my knees. Blinded by the light, I attempt to regain my balance before this train becomes my last memory...

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Why is Nathan's father abusive to his wife?
- 2) Does Nathan love his father?
- 3) Find a passage where it illustrates Nathan's true feelings for his father?
- 4) Why does Nathan's father physically abuse him?
- 5) Why won't Nathan run away from home and never return?
- 6) What are your feelings towards Nathan's mother?
- 7) Do you think his mother should have left Nathan behind?
- 8) Will Nathan's mother ever return?
Why or why not?
- 9) Describe some of the effects of alcohol (-ism) in this story.
- 10) Was Nathan's death a suicide?
- 11) How is it possible for Nathan to find peace inside a subway station?
- 12) Names some ways Nathan could have found help for his family.
- 13) Does Nathan grow up to become more like his mother or father?
Explain.

Brotherly Love

With blindfolded eyes, naked torsos' and bare feet, all sixteen of us were stuffed into a small closet. We were at Booker's fraternity house, somewhere about 30 minutes from campus. We didn't know one another's names; but every face was familiar. We were all freshman students-- far from our friends, far from our families, and far from our homes. But we had all been given special invitations after class to attend a secret fraternity social. We had no idea what we were getting into.

We stood like soldiers in that sauna for what seemed like hours. It was too crowded to move, too late to go home, and we were advised not to communicate with one another. Between the escalating heat, the stench of mothballs, and somebody's lack of deodorant, it was almost impossible to breathe. The person in front of me was tall and slender. I couldn't see them, but every time the rear of the line pushed forward, his shoulder blades stabbed me in the chest while his kinky Afro scratched my nose. I knew the person behind me was short and chubby, because every time the front of the line pushed backward it felt like someone was trying to place a pillow under my buttocks for me to sit down.

As time elapsed, my silk boxers began to stick to my skin like hot wax and the salty droplets from my brow caused the dye from my blindfold to bleed down my cheeks. The total darkness was transformed into spiraling twinkles of white stars as the square knot at the back of my head cut off my circulation. Absolute silence was tackled by a series of moans, later sacked by several defensive groans. I felt like I was wearing a pair of skis as we all stood toe-to-heel, toe-to-heel with locked knees and our bodies at a 45-degree angle-- stacked sweaty chest to sweaty back. I was not big enough to support all of the weight from the rear. But I was too weak to push all of the bodies off of me, and even more afraid to utter a single word. I was just

thankful I was the meat in the sandwich and not the bottom slice of bread.

Just when my head became too heavy for my neck to support it, the sound of Freddy Kruger's claws across a chalkboard pierced my eardrums. The closet door slammed open, a cool breeze kissed my flesh, and my blindfold glowed.

"All right, ladies," Booker said. "Come out of the closet, take off your blindfolds, and don't say shit."

Sighs of relief and the shuffling of feet filled the closet; but not a single word was uttered. A storm of metal hangers fell to the floor and several heads bumped against the wooden shelves above us.

"Be careful, you idiots. Take your blindfolds off first!" Booker warned us.

The knot in my blindfold was too tight for my knobby fingers to loosen. So I just slid the blindfold off over the top of my head with my right palm and stepped outside of the sliding doors. It took a couple of seconds for my eyes to get used to the light, but only one chubby boy among us, so I knew he had to be the one who had been behind me in the closet. I didn't look him in his eyes. I just stared briefly at the stretch-marks across his stomach and the irregular hair pattern that divided his belly into two hemispheres. It looked like a huge hairy centipede had been tattooed down his stomach.

"All right, freshies, everybody take a seat on the floor," Booker said.

Everyone dropped to their knees, panting like little puppies, and stared at Booker with solemn eyes - as if he were going to give us a Jerky Treat for responding to his command. "So how do you all feel?" he asked us. Everyone said either fine, all right, or O.K., and gave a nod, thumbs up, or plastic smile-- that is, everyone but me. I knew Booker realized I hadn't

responded to his question because his left eye squinted at me before he asked the next one. “No, really, is everyone doing all right?” Once again, everyone responded favorably-- everyone but me. The only difference was Booker’s litter of pups answered in unison the second time around. With both eyes narrowed, Booker glanced at me for the second time. I didn’t know if he was blinded by the fluorescent light reflecting off my sweaty face, or if he was trying to look through me for some reason. “Hey, Malcolm,” Booker said. I looked into his eyes. “Are you deaf or something? I’ve asked you twice how you’re doing. What’s your problem, huh?”

I wanted to ask him how the hell he thought I was doing, but it seemed inappropriate, being in an unfamiliar place and around unfamiliar people. I don’t have a problem,” I said. “You told me to come out of the closet, take off my blindfold, and not say shit.” I corrected myself. I mean to not say anything. I thought you were trying to trick me or something.”

The corners of Booker’s lips touched both of his earlobes as his cheekbones were hoisted a little higher than usual. With a slight tilt of his head, Booker pointed his index finger at me and cocked back his thumb-- like he did when he called on me in my freshman seminar to ask a question about Greek life on campus. “Good shit, Malcolm,” Booker responded. “We’ve got one out of sixteen who can follow simple directions. You might actually make it through this.” I didn’t know whether that was a compliment or some kind of sick threat, but I was ready to go back to my dormitory.

Booker stood over us and placed both of his hands on his hips. “Listen up! I know I called you all up and told you my frat was having a get-together tonight for all freshman students. Well, as you can see, we ain’t having the kind of party you all probably expected. You’re at the frat house, but you’re here because you’ve been selected as prospects into our

organization. We chose you all because you are the few who illustrate a genuine interest in Greek life when I came to speak during your seminar. That's why you, and only you, received an invitation to come here tonight."

As Booker went on and on, trying to validate his rationale for deceiving us, I closed my eyes and the words danced around my ears. I couldn't believe I'd let him pile me in my car with seven other people, drive me to God only knew where, take my shirt off, blindfold me, and stick me in a closet with a bunch of guys to hide until the strippers, I mean exotic dancers, came to the house. How stupid could I be? Why would a bunch of fraternity guys invite 16 first-semester freshman guys over to their house to partake in a striptease ?

"And those are the advantages of joining our brotherhood. The only thing you have to do is complete our little initiation process and maintain a good GPA this semester." Booker paused. "Hey don't look so sad, guys. We brought you here because we like you. Hey, one of our goals is to help unite young black men physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We're here to help you grow into stronger and more confident men who can make a difference. I know this is a lot to swallow at one time, but this is a highly secretive fraternity that conducts its business "underground" in order to safeguard its rich tradition. Are there any questions?"

Not a soul uttered a word.

"Come on, I know you all have something you want to know."

I looked around the room and noticed how everyone's eyes had drooped and their muzzles had sagged, while they sat patiently with their tails between their legs. There was a long pause.

"Okay, now I understand. You think that this is another test. No, you are really supposed

to ask questions now!”

The chubby boy hesitantly raised his right hand and stuttered W-w-what, e-e-exactly isda In-ini-initiation process?”

Good question, Michael,” Booker said. We will simply give you some history to learn, challenge you both physically and mentally. For example, putting you all in that hot closet was your first test to see if you really wanted to be here. And all of you passed! You were physically challenged by the heat, but you overcame the obstacle mentally because you wanted to see those hot babes we promised ya!” Booker chuckled, but he was the only one who appreciated the humor. “Look, guys, if any of you want to go back to the dorms, one of my bro’s will be more than happy to take you back. This is for you, not for me!” Booker walked over to the bedroom door, twisted the knob and swung the door open. “I’ll escort anyone to the car who does not want to learn more about my organization.” The chubby boy stood up and walked towards the door. Three others followed his lead and stood in a single-file line behind him. But just when I began to elevate myself from the floor, someone behind me said, “What a bunch of pussies!” So I took a deep swallow, grabbed both of my elbows, and rested my forehead on my knees. “Anyone else want to go home?” Booker asked. I just sat there and rubbed my forehead back and forth across my knees. I didn’t dare look at Booker because I knew my eyes would give me away. I felt like a pussy, but I refused to be considered one.

“Okay, let’s get you all back to campus,” Booker said. Eight feet followed his lead and the door slammed shut. Except for the ticking of the clock and the bubbling water in the fish tank, the room was quiet. But about twenty seconds later, someone else got up from the cold wooden floor and headed for the door. I lifted my head just in time to get a rear view of someone

else leaving. I think it was the guy I stood behind in the closet because I got a glimpse of his kinky Afro before he closed the door behind himself. Then all of a sudden the floor beneath me began to rumble and I felt as if I were sitting in the middle of a bowling lane. I heard glass break, doors slam, and a flurry of curses gun down the five students who chose to go home.

“Get the fuck outta here you fuckin’ cowards,” someone screamed.

“Pussies...we didn’t even touch y’all yet!” someone else echoed.

“Where the hell did you get these bitches from, Booker? This is the last time we send you out as a scout, the last voice shouted before the final slam of a door brought a spell of silence over the entire house. Before long, I heard quick-moving feet marching outside--right under the bedroom window. Three doors were opened, an ignition was fired, three doors were closed, and the screech of burning rubber cut through the air. I knew I was in for a long night after the car sped out of the driveway and the foot stomps became increasingly louder as they neared the closed door. I heard the doorknob twist, but worst of all I heard Booker’s voice.

“Okay, listen up. My frat brothers have taken five of you home already. Is there anyone else who wants to go back to the dorm?” Booker put both of his hands on his hips and turned his entire head back and forth to scan the room (like a robot), as if he had that large of an audience. He kind of reminded me of the Terminator-- but he was about 150 pounds lighter, two feet shorter, about six or seven shades darker, and missing at least three-fourths of the IQ-- probably more. “All right then, tonight we’re going to start your interview process. I’m going to blindfold you all again and take you downstairs one by one to meet the rest of the frat. Everyone’s going to be trying to talk to you at the same time to see how well you work under stress, but don’t let them get to you. Just relax and answer the questions as best as you can.

After everyone has had their turn, I'll take you all home, okay? Any questions?"

I looked around the room and found a little comfort in the dumbfounded faces that stared at Booker's lips, but then I saw the reflection of the biggest dummy of all in the fish tank that sat on the dresser in front of me. "Okay, who wants to go first?" Booker asked. Not a soul responded. "Come on now, it's getting late. And I know you all want to hurry and get this over with. It won't be bad, really."

Like a jack rabbit, an average-height muscular dude jumped to his feet. He was dark-skinned, with a bald head and thick eyebrows. He stood directly in front of Booker with closed fists and wrinkled jeans. He also had a scar on his lower back that resembled the Batman logo. "That's what I like to see, Richard," Booker said. A man with some balls. Now put your blindfold back on so that we can get on with this."

I wasn't impressed that Richard wanted to play hardball without a helmet, or even a team for that matter. But I did wonder how Booker remembered everyone's name so well. I guess he did his homework before he suckered us all into his scheme. "You all just sit here and don't touch or say shit," Booker told the 10 of us who sat on the floor looking puzzled, terrified and fatigued. "Come on, Richard." Booker grabbed Richard's right wrist and led him out of the room. "Close the door behind you." Richard frantically fanned the air until he found the doorknob. Then he pulled it shut.

Once again, everything was quiet-except for the ticking of the clock, the bubbling water in the fish tank and the panting of my heart. Then all of a sudden, the floor beneath me began to rumble again. I could hear glass break and doors slam, but I couldn't make out any words no matter how tight I squeezed my eyes. The commotion downstairs lasted for about 15 minutes

before Booker came back for his next victim. The doorknob turned and the door slammed open.

I hope whoever is next has a little more heart than Richard. He got scared and we had to take him home too,” Booker said.

I just grabbed my elbows tighter and continued to dig my forehead into my knees. By that point, I had decided to assume the vertical fetal position until there were no more volunteers to go next.

“So who’s it gonna be?” Booker asked. And once again, another black superhero volunteered to be Kamikaze.

This went on for hours...one person left the room for an interview and no one returned. Before long, there was only me and three Goldfish in the room. I tried to stay optimistic, so I slid my school I.D. under the bed so the F.B.I. would know whom to investigate after they found my body. The foot stomps got louder and louder as Booker approached the door. The knob twisted and I heard the door open slowly. I could hear the fatigue in Johnny's voice.

“All right, kid. You ready or what?” he said.

I guess it was hard work leading freshman down the stairs to hell and running back up again for another. I didn’t say a word, I just stood up, put my blindfold on, and held my right wrist out for Booker to grab. He led me out of the room; but didn’t tell me to close the door. “Watch your step!” he said. I had taken about 12 baby steps (all leading with my right foot), before I heard a loud whisper.

“Start the tape, start the tape, dummy, shhhh.” Then the all familiar breaking-of-glass and slamming-of-doors soundtrack echoed throughout the staircase. “What a bunch of losers, I

said to myself. It was a burden off my shoulders to know that at least half of this was a prank. My heart slowed down to about 200 beats per minute.

“Sit down right here,” Booker said.

As soon as I stopped, the firing squad aimed and fired at will.

What's your name, boy?” the first voice asked me.

“Where are you from?” the second asked.

“Why did all of your faggot classmates run back home to their mothers, huh?” the third voice asked.

“Are you old enough to be in college?” the fourth voice asked.

“My name is Malcolm,” I recall answering. “I'm a twenty-one-year-old freshman from Chicago, Illinois.”

“Hello, mighty Frat brothers, I'm a pussy from Chicago, Illinois” the original voice mocked. “All of my faggot friends have left me behind to get my ass beat by myself, and you know what, I-I-I'm sad.” Laughter filled the room. But for the first time that night, I was half way comfortable. I played along with their little “Embarrass-The-Freshman” game and figured they were too immature to cause me too much harm. They were so obnoxious I couldn't help recalling the childhood saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It took them all of about five minutes to realize that I wasn't intimidated, and since I was the last one, they cut my interview short.

“Good shit, good shit,” Booker whispered into my ear before he took off my blindfold.

When I opened my eyes, there were about 20 naked asses mooning me and about 20 voices singing some sort of chant in unison. I held my breath and turned behind me to witness the ten

other people who had come with me sitting on the floor with their backs against the wall. Some of them had a silly smirk on their face, but I took it as a subtle sigh of relief.

After all of the drama, Booker introduced us formally to each of his fraternity brothers and congratulated us on passing the first part of our initiation process. Soon after, Booker called for a huddle and told us we would have to come back to the house every night at the same time so we could get our pledge process over and done with. “You guys have already got the first part over with,” he said. “Now all you have to do is go through the physical and mental challenges so you can all be Greek, by Homecoming.”

Then out of nowhere, a voice interrupted Booker. “Booker. Take those little boys back home. You know that they have to get up and go to class in the morning!” Booker looked bewildered for a instant. “Ah, yeah. Today’s only Thursday,” he said. He directed us to our shirts and shoes and told us to go outside and wait by the car we had ridden in on the way to the house. All ten of us moved quickly and still said nothing to one another. We waited outside for about 15 minutes while the frat brothers had a brief meeting with Booker.

“I’ll meet you guys here tomorrow night at 10,” Booker yelled. “Make sure you all know everything about one another cause you’re gonna be brothers soon...” The Chrysler pulled off with the Explorer following close behind. I watched the red taillights brighten and then dim as the two cars approached the Stop sign at the end of the block. Then they made a right turn and disappeared. Relieved, disgusted and fatigued, I sat on the curb while everyone introduced themselves to one another.

“Hey, dude, what’s the matter with you?” one of the nine voices asked me.

“Nothing,” I replied. I’m just ready to go to bed.”

“Well, I hope you plan on meeting the rest of us here tomorrow at ten, he said.

There was along pause, but I said nothing. I knew they were all waiting for my response, but I didn't have one I wished to share with a bunch of guys I really didn't know. I could feel their eyes staring at the back of my head and heard several footsteps making their way towards me.

“Ay, what's his name again?” someone whispered.

“Malcolm, I think,” someone responded

“Malcolm, all of us are upset about being tricked tonight,” a deep voice said.

“But tonight wasn't all that bad. No one even got hurt or anything! Those fraternity guys are gonna give us a chance to join their organization. Do you realize what that means?”

Again, there was a long pause.

“Hey, just forget about that dude, someone said. It's three o'clock in the morning, and I've got class in five hours. If he wants to do it he will, and if he doesn't, who cares? I don't want nobody that's gonna act like a pussy to pledge with me anyway.

After I heard the word “pussy,” I knew the voice had to be the same one that degraded the guys who didn't want to go through with the interview process earlier. I didn't appreciate his lack of compassion, nor did I like his choice of words. Still sitting with my back towards everyone, I took a deep breath and exhaled very slowly.

“You know what?” I asked. “I didn't come to college to pledge some fraternity the first semester I got here. When and if I ever decide to pledge, it'll be by my choice-not yours, okay?”

“Hey, I didn't mean it like that,” he said. I realize we've all only been here for three weeks. But you know there's no denying this is the most popular fraternity on campus. And

they want you, Malcolm! Everyone on campus, except for Booker and his brothers, has treated us like shit since the first day we ‘freshies’ got here. Hell, the ten of us wouldn’t even be here now talking with one another if Booker hadn’t invited us to his house.”

“That’s right, you tell ‘em,” someone added.

“Yeah, this is our chance,” another chimed.

“Preach on, Brother Malcolm X,” someone else mocked.

“Listen up, Malcolm,” Richard said. “We’ve all just started something together tonight. If you didn’t want to go through with it you should have left when Booker gave you the chance earlier. But you still have a chance to quit now, that is if you’re a quitter. The rest of us will be here tomorrow at ten p.m.

It didn’t take me long to admit to myself I didn’t hate Richard-- I just envied him. I stood up and turned around. All of the guys imitated Richard by standing tall with crossed arms and tilted heads. I wasn’t totally convinced by Richard impromptu speech.

It was in my best interest to pledge the fraternity; but that night was the first time since school started that I found myself surrounded by guys I had something in common with.

“So ya gonna be here tomorrow or what?” Richard asked.

Slowly, I shook my head no, but replied, “Yeah, I guess I’ll be here.

“Okay, smart ass,” Richard said. Then he punched me softly on my left shoulder and the rest of the guys joined in the playful attack. I made an X across my chest with my forearms and tucked my chin between my fists to block most of the punches. After they finished making a human punching bag out of me, everyone said “Good night” to one another and went to their rooms. I still didn’t know everyone’s names, but it was too early in the morning for me to care.

I went to all of my classes the following day. I looked for the guys everywhere on campus, but they were nowhere to be found. As the day grew longer, I became more and more nervous about what Booker would have in store for us that night. So I went to bed and set my alarm for 9:30 p.m.-- I figured I could use the extra four and a half hours of rest since I was up late the previous night. At 9:25 p.m., I awoke, and was just as nervous as I was before I went to sleep. I decided to take a quick shower and got dressed as fast as I could. By 9:45 p.m., there was a knock at my door.

“Yeah, who is it?” I said.

“Richard...let’s go. Everybody’s waiting outside.”

“Okay, I’ll be right out. Just let me finish lacing my shoes.”

“All right, we’ll meet you in the front by the curb.”

“All right!”

When I glanced at my clock on the way out of my door it read 9:49 p.m., but when I made it out front to meet the guys they all looked at me with disgust. “What?” I asked, jogging toward them. “I’m ready.”

No one said anything to me. They just all faced the stop sign down the street and stood with their hands in their pockets. Within a couple of minutes, the Chrysler sped around the corner with the Explorer bringing up the rear. The cars pulled up in front of us and Booker rolled down the window.

“Y’all get in the car and don’t say nothing to nobody,” he said.

The ten of us loaded into the two vehicles and followed Booker’s orders. When we got to the fraternity house, Booker escorted us inside and told us to line up shoulder-to-shoulder along

the living room wall.

“Okay, bitches, tonight will mark the first night of your pledging process,” Booker said. I want y’all to know that pledging Alpha Alpha isn’t easy. This shit here is only for the strong-minded and lion-hearted. Don’t nothing in life come easy, and I swear this shit we’re about to put y’all through ain’t no cake walk. Every one of you will learn the true essence of brotherhood through one another make it through this process. All ten of you will learn to depend upon one another, to protect each other, and to love one another for the sacrifices each of you will make.”

Booker’s eyes began to redden and his nostrils flexed each time he paused to take a quick breath. Both of his fists were closed tight and his chest jerked upward each time he started a new sentence.

“Now listen up! I am the only person you all are to listen to. Don’t even worry about getting to know the rest of the fraternity brothers until after you finish this process. You’ll hate each and every one of our guts before you learn to love us for carrying on the traditions of our grand fraternal bond. Alpha, Alpha, Alpha, Alpha, Alpha, Alllllllllphaaaa, motherfuckers!”

Booker’s eyes became glassy and his voice began to crack as at least 15 of his fraternity brothers rushed down the stairs that led to the living room screaming, “Allllpha, Allllpha, Allllpha.” Each one of them had the rage of a bull in his eyes, the 10 of us standing with our backs to the wall like the red flags they charged for. As the mob drew closer to us, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. From out of the corners of my eyes, I saw the guys duck their heads behind their arms and raise their thighs to protect their ribs. But their was no defensive stance that could protect us from the flurry of knuckles that pounded our flesh and the merciless kicks that bruised our shins. Forearms collided with cheekbones, knees were buried into tender

stomachs, and elbows fell hard upon our necks. The storm was upon us and there was no telling how long it would last. “Alpha, Alpha, Alpha” chants drowned our cries of anguish, and our pleas for mercy went unanswered.

“How bad do you want it, freshie?”

“Do you want it? Do you want Alpha?”

“AIIIIIIII.”

“This is my frat, mine!”

“Phaaaaaa.”

I slid my buttocks down the wall and continued to rest my elbows on my hips as my arms shielded my face and chest from the attackers. But someone grabbed my wrists and raised them both skyward, while another planted his Stacey Adams deep into my midsection. All of my breath left my body and the pain made it impossible to inhale. Tears filled my eyes while hatred filled my heart.

“Wait a minute, Frat. I said wait a minute, Fraternity Brother!” Booker yelled. “One of em is having a asthma attack or something! Are you all right, Malcolm? Where’s your inhaler? Freshies, does Malcolm have asthma or is he just acting like a little bitch right about now?” No one said a word. I said, who knows whether or not Malcolm has asthma? Richard!”

After a few moans, Richard answered, “I don’t know.”

“What the hell do you mean you don’t know?” Booker replied. Didn’t I tell your ass last night to make sure you know everything about your future fraternity brothers? How the hell do you plan to make it through this process as a team without knowing each other’s strengths and weaknesses? You are all piss poor! All nine of you better get over here right now and help

Malcolm to his feet.”

As I began to recapture my breath, a host of arms attached themselves to me. I felt as if I'd been attacked by an octopus as at least a dozen sweaty tentacles grabbed hold of my wrist, elbows, armpits, waist, legs, shirt, and belt loops-- and hoisted me to my feet.

“All right, Brothers, that’s enough for tonight,” Booker said. “Give me a moment to talk to the guys alone.” As Booker’s brothers departed from the room, the rage disappeared from their eyes and they patted us on our backs and shouted words of encouragement in our direction.

“Good shit, fellas, you all stay tough, all right?”

“Ay, you all hang on in there. It’s all mental, baby. It’s all mental.”

“Take it light, Malcolm. Pain in temporary; but Alpha Alpha is forever.”

“That's right, baby, Alpha is the beginning. And you all are beginning a new life.”

“All right, fellas, have a seat over here,” Booker said. Is everyone okay?” There was a brief period of silence, but no one answered Booker. I know there must be a lot of things going through your minds right now, because a lot of shit went through my mind two years ago when I bled on the same floor that you are all sitting on now. Well, tonight you have had your first taste of Alpha. You have to remember nothing we do to you is personal; so don’t take it personal. If we didn’t want you to become a part of our frat, we wouldn’t have invited you to our house or trusted you not to go to the police after tonight. Everything that happens from this point on does have a purpose and has happened to each member of Alpha Alpha who pledged before you. At times, it will seem as though I have a split personality. One moment I may be compassionate, and the next I may be a total dick.”

A devilish smirk appeared on Booker’ face.

“It is my job this semester to make sure this pledge class becomes humble to Alpha Alpha, so we can help you all bond with one another and discover vital things about yourselves. Through the trials and tribulations we place in your paths, you will learn there is nothing in the world you can’t accomplish once you put your minds to it. Those of you who can keep pledging Alpha Alpha a secret from your families, friends, teachers, classmates, and still maintain good grades in your classes, will be the men of Alpha Alpha will accept into it’s brotherhood. Now straighten yourselves up and get out to the car so we can get you back to the dorms.”

Everyone rose to their feet very slowly and walked out the front door. Once outside, we all eased into two cars like old men with arthritis. I sat in the front seat and snored during the car ride back to campus (well, Richard told me I snored)...

Once we returned to campus, Richard suggested everyone meet in his room for a discussion about our pledging process. I remember lying face down on the floor with my head against the wall. But I couldn’t have stayed awake for more than 15 or 20 minutes.

“All right, y’all can have a seat anywhere you can find a spot, Richard said.

“Have a seat? Fuck that. I’ll have a seat at the police station when I’m pointing those bastards out during a lineup,” one of the guys said.

“You’re not going to tell the police anything,” someone else muttered.

“Like hell, I’m not. I hope your dumb ass is not gonna just let them beat you up and not do anything about it.”

“What do you think will happen when you go to the police and the rest of us deny that they laid a finger on you? Richard asked. “It’ll take them a whole year to prove anything, and by that time you would have gotten your ass kicked several more times by men wearing black

masks, been shunned from every social event, and ruined that rest of our chances of being Alphas.

“Well, you won’t ruin my chances if you snitch,” someone else said. “I’ve had enough of this bull shit. If I have to get my ass kicked every night for six weeks to be loved by the almighty brothers of the universe, I’ll just stay little ol’ safe and unbattered Jason from San Diego, California.”

“What!” Richard yelled. “You’re gonna quit after you’ve been through so much?” “Hell yeah, that’s all the more reason,” Jason said. “Are you on drugs or something? Those guys just beat you up. Hello, they’re not friends, Richard. Do you copy? Over and out?”

“That sounds like a good idea,” another voice responded. “This shit is over, so let me out!”

“Yeah, me too,” someone else responded.

“Hey, I’m right behind you, a voice echoed.

I didn’t know who was saying what, nor who was leaving the room. But I did hear dragging feet pass my head and an occasional “Excuse me,” before Richard's door slammed shut.

“Well, those pussies wouldn’t have made it anyway,” Richard said. “I guess it’s up to the three of us to this, fellas. Malcolm, wake up! Everyone has quit except for me, you and Steve. I’m telling y’all, we can do this together. I can feel it. If we just stick together, we’ll be through this in no time. And those guys will see Homecoming when we have our Greek Letters on and they wish they hadn’t quit.”

Richard went on and on about what great pledges the three of us would make, and how he couldn’t wait to graduate from high school to pledge a fraternity like his older had done. If it

weren't for Richard periodically addressing him by name, I wouldn't have known Steve was even in the room with us. The next thing I knew, Richard was waking me up for class the next morning.

Booker gave us that silver booklet filled with Alpha Alpha history we had to memorize. Then he taught the three of us how to properly take strokes from the fraternity paddle. Booker was very enthusiastic about the latter and seemed as though he were giving us a treat or something when he explained the significance of fraternity men paddling one another. "Now this is one of the oldest traditions of our fraternity," Booker said. "One of our founder made this oak paddle when he was in college, and today it is used to help pledges remember Alpha Alpha history. Whenever a fraternity brother asks you a question that's in your booklet and you don't know the answer, you have to bend over and take four strokes from the sacred paddle. Now the key to it is to try not to anticipate the stroke coming. Just bend over, place your right hand on your knee, and grab your balls with your left hand so you won't accidentally lose your family jewels.

"Each time you get hit shout, 'Ohhhh, how I love Alpha wood!' You guys want to try it?" I looked at Steve, Steve looked at Richard, and Richard looked down at the floor as my heart began to pump harder and faster.

"Uhhmmm, Smith," I said.

"Wrong," Booker replied. "Now bend your ass over and take some Alpha wood!" I bent my torso over at a 45 degree angle, placed my right hand on my kneecap and grabbed my balls with my free hand. The first stroke of wood just strung a little bit. The second stroke strung a lot. The third one missed my butt and bruised my hamstrings. The fourth and final stroke landed

across my tailbone before I fell to my knees in anguish. “What the hell are you all doing, Brothers?” Booker asked. Hit em in the ass-- not the back, or legs. You all are gonna kill him! Now whenever you want to shout, ‘Ohhhh, I love the Alpha paddle,’ Malcolm, we’ll start your count of four strokes for Alpha.”

I couldn’t believe Booker would be so cruel, and there were no words to express my anger. The fifth stroke made my eyes water.

“Oh, I love the Alpha paddle,” I said aloud. But in my mind I said, “Oh, I’d love to break this paddle,” over and over again. After the paddle was cracked across my backside for the sixth time, Richard bent over behind me and took the other two strokes from the paddle for me. At the very moment, I knew Richard was my friend and I would have to pay him back some day. Booker was impressed by the gesture and gave Richard that same look he’d given me when I took off my blindfold, stepped out of the closet, and didn’t say shit.

“Good shit, Richard,” Booker said. “Way to assist your future brother in need. If the rest of those pussies wouldn’t quit, they would have found out that it wouldn’t have been so bad if everyone helped one another out!”

The physical and mental tests continued throughout the night. Booker and the rest of his brothers would push each of us to our limits and then Richard, Steve, or I would come to one another’s rescue. Going to class the following morning was almost impossible. My ass was swollen, by body sore, and my mind could only focus on what I had experienced the night before. I could barely sit down in my seat during class. So I just tried to position myself so most of my weight was on the butt cheek that hurt the least, then after a while I shifted to the other side.

side.

When the sun began to set later that evening, my entire body began to tremble at the thought of what would be in store for me later that night. So my regular pattern for dealing with the stress was to go to bed until 9:45p.m. The next night, Steve never showed up outside by the curb. Richard and I got in a lot of trouble because we told Booker that Steve had fallen asleep and had forgotten to set his alarm clock. But Steve didn't show up the following night or the night after that.

When it was just Richard and I who were left to go to the fraternity house each night to recite Alpha Alpha history and receive a two-hour long beating accompanied by 15 minutes of praise about how well we were doing, I would ask myself why I kept going back. Maybe it was because I owed Richard and felt obligated to make sure I was there if he ever needed me, or maybe it was the thrill of living two separate lives, student and pledge- and excelling at both. Whatever it was, I knew I had come too far to quit. Before long, my pledge process had become a routine. I did homework in my classes during the day, studied Alpha Alpha history in the cafeteria, slept throughout the evening and went to the house with Richard at 10 o'clock in Booker's Chrysler.

By the fourth week of pledge process, Richard and I were inseparable. We ate together, slept together, cried together, and even lied together. We were an awesome team. Sometimes when I felt a little better than Richard I would do both of our homework. But Richard always shielded me with his body whenever I couldn't take any more punches or kicks. Sometimes Richard took so many strokes from the paddle in a given night that I had to massage his ass so the would be able to walk on his own the following morning.

By the end of our pledge process, Richard was indeed my brother. He wasn't my brother because of Alpha Alpha said so, or because students on campus expected us to be. He was my brother because he was there when he didn't have to be. He was my brother because he had helped me overcome obstacles I wouldn't have been able to conquer without his help. He was my brother because he had given me something that no man had ever trusted me with. Richard had given me himself, unconditionally. It took me a long time to feel comfortable enough to socialize with the rest of the Alpha Alpha brothers. But when homecoming came around. I felt like the prince of all Alphas-- it was my new beginning. Alpha Alpha brothers from all over the United States came to visit Hampton University and they knew everything about me before they even came.

Although we would never admit it in the presence of our frat brothers, the bond between Richard and me went much farther than Alpha Alpha. But we both knew that without the fraternity we would have never been friends. On the last night of our Homecoming weekend (the semester we pledged), Richard and I sat down together on the curb where Booker used to drop us off at night.

“Boy, I can't believe we finally did it,” Richard said.

“Nope. But it sure feels good,” I replied.

“Damn good.”

Slowly, Richard stood up over me and help out his hand with his fingers spread wide. I grasped his forearm as tightly as he squeezed my elbow and pulled me to my feet.

“Brothers forever, Malcolm?”

“Forever, Richard!”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What type of fraternal bond do you think Malcolm and Richard will share with Booker?
- 2) Do you think Malcolm will continue the cycle of hazing he has been exposed to? Why/Why not?
- 3) Now that he is an Alpha, how do you think Richard will treat the rest of the guys who chose not to finish pledging with him?
- 4) After reading this story, do you feel fraternity hazing should be legal/illegal in the United States? Why/Why not?
- 5) Who plans on joining a fraternity or sorority? Why?
- 6) Would you still consider pledging if you knew you could be expelled from school for submitting yourself to illegal hazing activities?
- 7) If you knew someone who you suspected was suffering physically and emotionally from a pledging process, would you involved yourself in the matter?
- 8) After reading this story, would you condemn any individual who chose not to continue pledging? Why/Why not?
- 9) Who was the hero in this story? Why?
- 10) Are Greek letter organizations different from gangs? Why/Why not?
- 11) What is the conflict in this story?
- 12) Was the conflict ever resolved?
- 13) Could Malcolm and Richard have become “brothers” without being physically abused together?

Inside the Kitchen

From inside the kitchen, I can see everything. I can see Mom's eyes begin to moisten as Dad's jugular surfaces from the side of his neck. I can see Dad placing his palms on the top of his shiny head as Mom shifts all of her weight to her right hip. I squint harder as Dad begins to close his eyes while he wipes the beads of sweat towards his brow. But my eyes widen as Mom cocks her fists behind her ear before firing it towards Dad's bearded face. Before she has an opportunity to reload, Mom finds herself buried under two-hundred and thirty-five pounds of flesh. Punishing words are exchanged, but I refuse to let them enter my ears. I watch them wrestle on the sofa before the glob of saliva launches from Mom's lips and lands on the bridge of Dad's nose...

Instantly, the muscles in my face begin to contract. My stomach twists itself into a knot as my fingers curl themselves into tight fists. As I sink my incisors into my bottom lip, a warm trickle of blood scales down my chin. I stumble to my feet and run towards the staircase--intentionally disregarding the broomstick, chair, and chilled glass of lemonade sweating on top of the marble counter. I skip every other step, as the sounds of shattered glass and broken ice-cubes sliding across linoleum tiles echo behind me.

I shield myself from the shrill of Mom's voice by slamming my bedroom door shut and burying my head under my pillow. The doorknob begins to twist violently, but I've already locked myself inside the sanctuary. Flashes of white light dance across the night sky, sending Morse codes through the glass frame. And God begins to move his dresser across the heavens. Within seconds, the clouds begin to cry as the wind whips their tears through my window screen. I turn my head to the left, but keep the pillow over my ears to muffle the sounds. I know my parents are on the opposite side of the

door, thinking of how to apologize to me, this time. But I refuse to open the door. I refuse to open the door and allow them to spoon-feed me with more false promises. The twisting of the doorknob ceases, but I know they're still standing there, listening. Slowly, I walk over to the mirror hanging on the door of my room and stare into my face. Here, I see a storm much worse than the one outside.

Chrome-colored liquid extinguishes the burning of my eyes, but there is nothing in the room that can soothe the pain I feel inside. I realize Mom and Dad will never love each other-- not like I want them to. Even when I was younger, Dad always surprised me with gifts and candy when he came home from work. But he would never bring anything home for Mom. Even then, he didn't realize that the greatest gift he could ever give me was to love my mother. I always anticipated the moment I'd catch Dad staring into Mom's soft brown eyes saying, "I love you, Nadine" (while I eavesdropped from the kitchen). And Mom. I used to hate it when she talked about Dad over the telephone. I used to sit outside on the front porch with my sketch pad in my lap and listen to Mom curse Dad through the screen door. Every time she used profanity, my pencil would slip across the page and I'd spend an extra 10 minutes erasing the mistake and even longer sharpening my yellow No. 2.

I hear two sets of footsteps trotting down the wooden stairs as I walk to the other side of my room. I have a seat on the edge of my bed as I gaze at the 5" X 7" photo on my nightstand. It's amazing how happy they used to be. They look so cute lying next to one another on the sand with strawberry Margaritas in their hands. Mom was really thin, back then. I still can't believe she actually wore her hair in pigtails on their honeymoon. And whew, Dad's stomach will never look like that again. It's funny how he degenerated

from mirroring a pro wrestler to a Sumo wrestler in a matter of a decade. Slowly, I lie flat on the bed with the picture frame placed snugly between my chest and arms. I realize this is probably the closest I'll ever get to hugging both of my parents at the same time.

The moment is interrupted by a light tap at the door.

"Jay." Mom whispers. "Jason, it's time for dinner, honey. Why don't you wash up and come on downstairs, okay?"

I know she's waiting for my reply because I can see the shadow of her foot shuffling, from under the crack of the door. Mom usually finds herself standing behind the closed door to my bedroom thinking of an excuse why she and Dad can't get along. But tonight, I'm just not in the mood. I don't feel like sitting at the dinner table pretending to be a family when I know Mom and Dad only eat together for my sake. Sometimes I feel as if the only reason they've stayed together this long is so I wouldn't run away again.

"Jason, I know you hear me in there," Mom says. "I've made your favorite-- spaghetti and meatballs. I've even got some fresh baked French bread. Honey, please open..."

Mom's voice is drowned by four heavy knocks at the door.

"Jason, open this door right now," Dad yells.

"Phil, I'm trying to talk with him," Mom whispers.

"Through a closed door?" Dad asks.

"Why don't you just let me finish?"

"Cut it out, Nadine," Dad says. "He's never going to learn if you keep catering to his every need."

“How dare you say that to me,” Mom shrieks.

I can tell she’s getting frustrated because the pitch of her voice usually goes up an octave whenever Dad says something that irritates her. There are four more knocks at the door. But this time, they’re much louder than the first. The hinges rattle for a moment while the mirror rocks itself on the nail. Before Dad has an opportunity to respond, I dash towards the door, turn the lock to the left and dive back onto my bed.

The door slowly creaks open while my body continues to spring up and down from my belly-flop onto the mattress. I’m curled into a fetal position, with a pillow trapped between the back of my head and my tightly clasped fingers. Even though their voices are muffled by the pillow, I can still hear my parents bickering as they approach my bedside. A warm palm wraps itself around my bicep. The fingernails dig deep, but not deep enough to break my skin. Dad turns me over by yanking my arm. I can actually see my reflection in his pupils. I’m surprised at how clearly I can see the wrinkles in my forehead along with the cleft in my chin. Then I realize Dad sees the same thing in my eyes. Neither one of us wants to be the first to blink, so the competition begins...

Horizontal, with my fingers still clasped tight behind my head, I attempt to look through my father's face. I try to look past his gray beard, past his tinted bifocals, and beyond his prune-like complexion. I look for those memories of my mother that sleep quietly in the back of his mind. I fly by the one when Grandma died first. There he is, rocking Mom in his arms as she rains tears on the front of his silk tie. Dad's palm strokes the side of her face while his fingers comb through her black curly hair. "Don't cry, baby," Dad says. "I'm here. I'm here for you, Nadine." I come to the memory of Mom's graduation. Dad presents Mom with a dozen red roses after she receives her diploma.

"I'm so proud of you," Dad says. Once I have them centered inside the window of my Polaroid, I witness them kiss for the very first time. The flash from the camera freezes that moment forever, but instantaneously takes me all the way back outside-- to the man who is hovering over me with his wife standing at his heels.

The whites of the eyes I stare into now are red and glossy. But I know the competition is far from over. Dad doesn't crack a smile. And neither do I. I watch a single teardrop form in the corner of his left eye before it slides down the side of his nose and across his lips and dangles from a single gray strand on bottom of his jaw. If it doesn't hang on, it will plummet three feet until it splashes onto my bare chest. The salty droplet stretches and wobbles until it loses its grip. As it falls, I feel my eyes widen as I watch Dad's narrow. I feel my mouth curve downwards as Dad begins to smile. I blink.

"Uhhhhhh," I say. "You're nasty."

"You thought you could beat me, huh?" Dad says.

"I would've beat you if you hadn't cheated."

"How did I cheat?" Dad replied. "I can't help it if looking at you makes my eyes water!"

"Get outta here."

"Hey, your Mom just finished making dinner. Get washed up and come on back downstairs, okay!"

"Yes, sir, I'll be down in a minute."

As Dad walks away, Mom wipes the teardrop from my chest with her index finger. I chuckle. Then she begins to poke at my ribs with the same finger.

"Okay, that's enough, Ma," I say. "Stop it."

"Not until you promise to hurry up so we can eat while everything is nice and hot!"

"Okay, I promise. I won't be long."

Mom winks her eye at me and I wink back. As she exits the bedroom, I look around the room for a shirt to wear. I pick up the blue and white T-shirt at the foot of my bed and bring it close to my nostrils to evaluate its freshness. I inspect the armpits of the shirt by sniffing for the lightest scent of Right Guard. Humm, seems pretty fresh to me. I pull the shirt over my torso and rush to the washroom to wash my hands.

As I begin walking downstairs for dinner, I overhear my parents having yet another debate. My lips contort as I continue down the staircase. The closer I get to the bottom, the more I realize they're not really having another fight. But I don't understand why Dad is whispering. He's never been soft-spoken.

"Phil," Mom whispers. "I can't believe you did that. You know those things are too dangerous."

"Relax. The boys knows how to handle one," Dad says.

"And then you say I'm the one who always gives him his own way!"

"Shhhh. Before the boy hears you yapping."

"I don't care if he hears me," Mom says. "I still say no."

"Well, it's too late."

A burst of adrenaline explodes inside of my body. I can't believe Dad actually bought me that hunting rifle I've been begging for. I continue walking down the staircase while keeping a straight face. Dad gets upset whenever I spoil his plans of surprising me. I find my place at the dinner table and wait for Mom to say the blessing.

“Wait a minute, Nadine,” Dad says (before looking towards me). “What’s wrong with you, Jason?”

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“Why are sitting there with that silly looking smirk on your face?”

“Uh, I was just thinking about Mom tickling me upstairs,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Are you sure that’s what you were thinking?” he replies. “You usually come downstairs looking like a lost puppy. But tonight, you look like... I don’t know what that crazy look is on your face.”

“I’m sure, Dad,” I say. “Everything’s cool.”

Mom glances at Dad before bowing her head towards the table. We all hold hands while she blesses the food she has prepared: “Bless us, oh Lord, and these our gifts-- which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

I finish eating first. But I don’t ask to be excused from the kitchen table because I have no idea how Dad plans to surprise me.

“Everything tasted great, Mom,” I say.

She cocks her head like a chicken while trying to swallow the noodles in her mouth. Her eyes blink several times before she finally says, “Why, thank you, baby. I don’t usually get many compliments around here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dad asks.

“Actually, I was speaking to my son,” she replies. “But I was saying it’s nice to feel appreciated when you live under the same roof with someone.” She stabs the plate with her fork and twists it around and around. As the fork winds the spaghetti into its

teeth, I watch Dad's thumb tap the edge of his plate. I rest my forehead inside the palm of my hand—anticipating Dad's reply.

“Are you saying you want me to praise you for cooking the groceries I purchased last Thursday?” Dad says. “And then salute you for feeding the three of us when I'm the one who provides us with heat, electricity and shelter?”

“I didn't say a damn thing about praise,” Mom says.

“Well, what are you complaining about?”

“Phil, why don't you just salute your ass...”

“Stop it,” I yell. “Please, just stop it. The both of you.” I stand straight, holding my clenched fists close to my lips. “Why do you two have to fight about everything?” I run towards the staircase as Mom calls my name. Skipping every other step, I stomp my feet as loud as I can until I reach the top. I walk into my bedroom, shut the door, and twist the lock to the left. I bury my head deep inside my pillow and squeeze my eyes tight.

As I open my eyes, the alarm clock continues to buzz and I discover blotches of blood on my pillowcase. I crawl out of bed and drag my feet 'til I reach the mirror that hangs on the back of my door. Inside the reflective glass, I see where the tears dried on my face and how the blood found its way to my pillowcase. I grab some Kleenex from my dresser and wipe the red stains from my nostrils. It hurts. While looking for my wastebasket, I notice a sealed envelope on the floor-- directly in front of my door. I pick it up, open it, and begin to read:

Jason,

I'm sorry about last night, Champ! You know I love you and your mother, don't you? Sometimes after people live together for a long time, they find it difficult to get along.

Well, I'm writing because I had a surprise for you last night! You've been doing really well in school, and I wanted you to know how proud I am of your accomplishments. If you want your gift, it's waiting for you in the garage.

Take care,

Dad

I rip the letter in half, press the Snooze button on my alarm clock, and hop back into bed. Ten seconds later, I'm tripping over my own feet trying to get downstairs to the rifle Dad has waiting for me in the garage. Once outside, I attempt to raise the garage door, but it's locked. I run back inside the house and borrow the garage keys from Mom's purse. I run back outside and try the lock for a second time. The latch releases and I slide the door skyward. The sunlight illuminates the garage. And Dad is blinded by its rays. My jaw drops to my chest, as Dad hands me the keys to my gift. She was beautiful...

"You promise me right now you'll be careful on this," Dad says. "This here is a powerful work of machinery, Jason."

"I promise, Dad. I know how powerful it is."

"No, no you don't. This motorcycle can go from zero to sixty in about four seconds." Dad pinches the cigarette butt hanging from the corner of his lips with his index finger and thumb while taking a couple more drags. "Like any woman, you've gotta learn to respect her, Jason. Once you do that, this beauty'll do whatever you want it

to whenever you tell it to.”

“Thank you, Dad,” I say. “I think I’m gonna call her Raven.”

“Raven?”

“Yeah, like the bird.”

“Well, it works for me!”

Slowly (but not cautiously), I walk over to the motorcycle and stroke her backside exactly three times. Next, I stoop to one knee and make sure her chain is sufficiently lubed and her tire pressure just right. As I get back to my feet, I gently blow away the dust that had collected on her brow. I am no Casanova, but I do hold the key to Raven’s heart. I insert it softly before turning it clockwise—very delicately. Mom taught me not to push anyone’s buttons, but there’s a tiny red one by Raven’s armpit I can’t resist. One delicate tickle from my thumb is all it will take to get her attention. I press it. She reacts favorably-- humming quietly and steadily.

I wait for her to idle down a bit before twisting her throttle backwards three long times just to hear her scream, “Jaaaason... Jaaaason... Jaaaason!” I’m convinced she’s warmed up. After straddling her like a horse, I balance her body with my right leg while using my left heel to kick back her stand. I’m ready to ride and so is she. So I squeeze the clutch, shift from neutral to first gear, and send a flood of gasoline rushing through her veins.

Raven’s rear tire spins as I exit the garage and glide to the end of our driveway. “Be careful,” I hear Dad yelling behind me. I stop at the end of the block and look into my rearview mirror. Dad is watching me while he continues to suck on that cigarette butt. And Mom peeps at me through the livingroom curtains, shaking her head in disgust.

I'm sure she'll bitch at Dad and me later, 'cause I'm not wearing a helmet. I don't have a destination. I just want to go somewhere. Somewhere far. It can be pretty dangerous riding around the streets of Chicago—especially with so many potholes scattered across my neighborhood. Potholes are like land mines to a motorcycle, you know? So I guess I'll take the expressway to one of the southwest suburbs. There, the streets are sure to be well paved. And if there is a hole in the street, construction workers will have the decency to place one of those neon orange and white signs over the obstruction.

On the expressway, Raven is a metallic rocket on two wheels. Her body is a rock of coal that glides through the air on wheels made of diamonds—shimmering in the sunlight. Once we get up to about sixty miles per hour I squeeze my thighs tighter around her frame and lay my chest on top of hers. Chin up and elbows tucked in tight, I duck behind her windshield to keep my eyes from watering too much. At seventy m.p.h. we slice through the wind like a well-crafted sword. At eighty m.p.h. she begs me to slip her up into fifth gear. At ninety m.p.h., the very top of my shaved scalp starts to tingle--the part that can't fit under Raven's windshield. At about one-hundred five m.p.h. I can hear nothing--- not even her screaming my name. Everything is silent and peaceful. It's like the whole world is frozen in time and I am the only one moving... fast. I have nothing to worry about and everything to fear at the same time. There is no time to think. My decisions are quick and spontaneous. There is no time for me to doubt myself. It is either left or right, brake or gas. Nothing else matters... I am flying. Not higher; but farther than I ever have before.

When I return home, Dad is sitting inside of his '77 Ford Mustang. But the car is parked inside the garage.

“So how does she ride?” Dad asks.

“She doesn’t,” I say. “She flies like a bird.”

“I’m glad you like the bike, son.”

“Dad, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why are you out here sitting in the garage?”

“Get in, and I’ll tell you.”

“My back hurts from riding Raven. Mind if I stretch out across the back seat?”

“Naaa,” Dad says. “Just watch your feet on my seats”

I open the passenger-side door and slide in the back. Dad grabs the steering wheel with both hands and adjusts his rear-view mirror. The keys are in his ignition, but they’re turned backwards—so he can listen to the radio without wasting gas.

“Jason,” Dad says, “after you went to bed last night, your mother and I discussed a lot of things. And we’ve decided it’ll be best if we didn’t live together any longer. We really need some time away from each other at this point in our lives.”

“What?” I say. “What about... Where are you... How are y’all gonna make that decision without asking me anything?” I can feel Dad’s eyes watching me through his rear-view mirror. So, I take a deep breath as his words dance around my ears.

I help him pack enough of his belongings to last a couple of weeks. But I vow never to let my parents flood my ears with lies again.

Since Dad’s been gone, the only one I’ve been able to count on is Raven. I’m with her every day. She takes me away from all the problems at home and I make sure

she gets all the attention she needs. Mom doesn't like her. She never says so, but she always asks me why I can't find another hobby. I hate when she refers to my relationship with Raven as a hobby or sport. Hobbies are things you do in your free time. Maybe that's why Dad moved out and decided it would be best to just come visit us on the weekends. I mean, maybe their marriage didn't work because the life-long commitment thing somehow got turned around into being some sort of recreational activity to them. When Dad comes over to visit, I usually eavesdrop on their conversation from inside the kitchen.

"...Would you just listen to me, Phil," Mom says. You've got to take that motorbike away from Jason as soon as possible. Please!"

"Hey, I've been listening to you for the past fifteen minutes. There's only so many different ways you can say you don't want Jason to have the motorcycle anymore."

"What do you mean 'anymore'? I told you when you first bought that thing I didn't want Jason riding on it. It's too dangerous. And besides, Jason hasn't been the same since you gave it to him. It's the only thing he cares about, Phil!"

There is a long pause. But there's always a long pause when Mom is right and Dad needs more time to think of what to say next. I can picture Dad tapping the coffee table with his thumb right about now.

"Phil," Mom says softly, "ever since you got Jason that motorbike he has alienated himself from everybody. Now, you know he's not doing well in school anymore—not even in his art classes. He quit working at the mall and rarely gets phone calls from his friends anymore. Something's not right!"

"Yeah, but he's probably just having trouble dealing with our separation. At least

he doesn't run away like he used to."

"What do you mean," Mom yells. "He runs away every day for hours at a time on that damn motorbike! He doesn't even wear his helmet like he promised you he would. When something happens to him, you just remember who bought him that damn thing."

"Well, maybe you're right, Nadine."

What! I can't believe what I'm hearing. Mom and Dad have never discussed anything fighting. All of their conversations concluded with either a physical or verbal altercation. Maybe it's been me all along. Maybe I'm the one thing that's been standing in the way of their happiness. Shit, I've got to get outta here. And no one's going to take Raven away from me!

I decide to sneak out the back door while Mom and Dad continue their conversation. Light sprinkles of rain kiss my flesh as I slowly lift the garage door. If I lift too fast, Mom will surely hear the vibrations inside the house. Hmmmmm, got it! Now for the hard part. Quickly, I dash to Raven's side and grab her shoulders. I kick up her stand with my right heel and push all four hundred pounds of her outside the garage and down the slippery asphalt. I jump on, turn the key, and fire the ignition.

Suddenly, the light on the front porch comes on while the livingroom curtains begin to spread wide. Raven's rear tire spins for what feels like three seconds before she finds the proper footing. I try to stop as I reach the red octagon at end of our block, but we end up hydroplaning at least twenty feet. I turn her arms into the direction of the skid and trust in her ability to ride it out.

The rain begins to fall heavily, but I don't mind. I begin to picture myself in one of those soda-pop commercials: "Feels so good comin' down... 7-UP!" My visibility

worsens, so I open Raven's eyes by switching on her "brights." We fly straight ahead-- since we both have reservations about making any sudden turns. Each drop of rain that splashes on my forehead somehow soothes my mind about the situation I've just escaped. As I relax, I pull the throttle backwards a little. Each headlight that shines in my rearview mirror represents exactly where I want Mom and Dad in my life-- far behind me. I give Raven a little more gas. I run through the Stop sign because there's no way I can brake in time. A chill runs down my spine.

The rain ceases; but I'm still flying. Two gray and white birds (possibly pigeons) are taking a drink from a puddle up ahead. I can't resist the temptation to part the small sea. "Just a little more," I tell Raven. Halfway through the puddle, Raven's nose plunges down into the camouflaged ditch. My thighs lose their grip as I'm both elevated and separated from Raven forever. I see and hear nothing.

The blinding light pains my eyes as I realize I've made it to heaven. The cumulus cloud beneath me floats higher and higher as little white angels float all around me. I can't make out their faces, but I'm sure they're touching me. My eardrums ring. I try to remove the annoying chime but have no feeling in my arms or legs. Then I hear a voice. "Jason," Mom says. "Just relax, Jason. Everything is going to be all right." I feel her soft lips on top of my brow. My vision blurs before my eyelids collapse.

I'm doing pretty well now. I wake up with a migraine each morning, but Doc says I'm recovering pretty fast. There's not much to do in a hospital when the lower half of your body is mummified and suspended in the air. Fortunately, the nurses gave me the bed by the window. Outside, there is a huge oak tree that rests one of its branches against

the ledge. Each morning, a shiny bird with black plumage comes to visit me. She stares directly through my window and croaks cries of encouragement for at least twenty seconds or so. But today, she hasn't stopped by to say hello. I miss Raven.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) **Who/what does Jason love the most?**
Explain.
- 2) **Who is the better parent?**
Why?
- 3) **Is Jason a rebellious child?**
Why/why not?
- 4) **Do you believe that Jason's father never brought his wife a gift?**
Why/why not?
- 5) **What is the significance of Jason's motorcycle?**
- 6) **Do you believe Jason will ever ride a motorcycle again?**
Explain.
- 7) **How does Jason treat his mother?**
- 8) **How has his parents separation affected him emotionally?**
- 9) **Is Jason a believable character?**
Why/why not?
- 10) **What is the significance of the quote, "Hobbies are things you do in your free time..."**
- 11) **Why does Jason's Dad sit inside his '77 Ford Mustang while it's parked inside the garage?**
- 12) **Will Jason grow up to become an abusive husband?**
Why/why not?
- 13) **If you were Jason, how would you deal with your parents' separation/divorce?**
- 14) **Why does Jason's father buy him the motorcycle in the first place.**
- 15) **What will Jason do after he returns from the hospital?**

The Red Cap

I miss Timothy. I really do. I miss the grimacing smirk he used to hide in the center of his right palm whenever he caught me lying to Mom about my whereabouts. I miss talking to him before I go to bed at night. I used to sit in the dark with my back against the headboard, watching him roll back and forth under his electric blankets. We would stay up all night rating the best looking girls at school. Tim never said much, but he always listened to me—before falling asleep. I miss fishing with him at Dawson’s Creek on Friday afternoons. Whenever I didn’t have to serve detention, we would race the entire mile it took to get home just so we could change our clothes and get to the creek before the rest of our friends. We would sit on that old termite-infested log for hours, holding our fishing poles steady between our clenched fists—just in case the big one decided to give either one of us a bite. We never caught any fish, but sometimes we would bring a toad or two home just to hear Mom scream, “Get those nasty things outta this house, you two-- and wash your hands.” I never told Tim that I loved him, but I never felt I actually needed to say the words...

When we were in grade school, we used to spend our summer nights camping out in the backyard. I would microwave the hot Pizza-Pockets and Tim would get the orange soda and Gummy Bears. We’d spray each other’s arms and legs with a can of OFF before zipping the tent closed behind us. After we stuffed ourselves with junk food and soda, we would see who could make the scariest face while holding the flashlight directly under his chin. The loser would have to run back inside the house and clean up the kitchen before Mom went to bed. Usually, we both ended up doing the kitchen because it was too scary being outside in the tent all alone. When we worked together, it usually didn’t take us more than fifteen minutes to finish it all.

“Hurry up, Tim,” I remember saying to him. “Why don’t you start sweeping while I finish washing the dishes.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say,” Tim replied. “I’ll sweep, Terry, but you’re still gonna have to come over here and hold the dustpan after I finish.”

“Come on, you don’t need me to hold it for you. You just don’t want me to finish washing before you finish sweeping. Can’t you just hold the dustpan in one hand and sweep with the other?”

“No, I can’t, Mr. Showoff. I need somebody to hold it for me.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, Timmy Boy.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Why? Would you rather be called Timmy Girl.”

“O.K., since you’re so busy making fun of people’s names, the only one of us who has a girl name is you. Terry, Terry, the scary tooth-fairy.”

I definitely knew how to press Tim’s buttons. But I can’t remember a time when he didn’t use one of my jokes against me. Teasing him was like throwing a boomerang of insults—eventually, the insults would come back to hurt me. He knew there were two things in life I hated. The first thing was my name. The second was looking like Tim’s twin. When we were younger, there was nothing I could do about either of the two. I was too young to change my name and too broke to buy my own clothes. Mom had this thing about dressing Tim and me alike every single day of our lives. Even though we were two years apart in age, everyone thought we were twins. We were always told that we got our slender build from Mom, our wide nose from Dad, our bushy eyebrows from Grandpa, and our small ears from being stingy. I never blamed Mom for our genetics,

but I still haven't forgiven her for making Tim and me wear the same outfits to school every day. And the worst part about it was that she always bought our outfits in two different colors. I'll let you guess who always got the colors I wanted...

"Tim, gimme your hand so we can cross the street."

"I'm not holding your hand like some little girl. Just because you're a Boy Scout don't mean you can treat everybody like a little old lady."

"Just gimme your hand, Tim."

"Naw, let my sleeve go. You're not gonna use me to get yourself another one of those ugly iron-on patches."

"Fine. But if a car comes, I hope you can move out of the way fast enough in those butt-huggers you're wearing!"

"I ain't worried about moving too fast. I'm more worried about you blinding people with those neon pants Mom got you. You look like a 12-year-old midget crossing-guard, Terry."

"Ahhh, shut up!"

"No, really. If I get hit by a car with you standing in front of me with those pants on... then, then, it'll just be meant to happen."

Even our teachers thought Tim and I were twins. Tim was slightly taller than I, so most of the kids at school assumed he had failed a couple of grades. I can't recall all of the times I had to fight the guys after school for teasing Tim about his schoolwork. But I'm sure Principal Skinner still has most of them on file. Tim did have a little trouble in math, science, and reading, but he had never failed a grade until his freshman year of high school. That's another story.

It's another story because life was so much simpler when Tim and I were younger. We ate breakfast together, walked to and from school together, studied together, ate dinner together, washed dishes together, and even slept in the same room together. We had no worries and definitely no fears. We knew we would always be there for one another, and even swore on each other's blood nothing would tear us apart.

It happened when Mom and Dad went on vacation and left us with Ms. Reynolds for the weekend. Ms. Reynolds was our 93-year-old babysitter who was notorious for falling asleep at the kitchen table at precisely 7:30p.m. Mom and Dad knew she usually went to bed early; that's why they advised her to send us to bed at 9:30 p.m. By 10:15 p.m. Tim had already wrapped a blanket around the old woman resting on the table while I stood in front of the microwave with my index finger on the OFF button—waiting for the popcorn to finish popping. We didn't want to risk the chance of the bell from the timer waking Ms. Reynolds from her slumber. At 10:30 p.m., Tim and I sat facing one another on opposite ends of the living room sofa—directly in front of the big screen. My legs were inside of Tim's since his were longer and the buttery bucket of popcorn rested on top of my kneecaps.

“Why do you keep moving your toes?” I remember Tim asking me.

“Don't you worry about what I do with my toes, you freak.”

“Oh, I'm very worried.”

“Why?”

“Cause you're tickling my nuts, you pervert!”

I folded my knees in a panic as the bucket soared sky high. Salty kernels dripping with butter rained upon us as laughter filled the room...

“O.K., shhhhhh,” I said, “before we wake up Ms. Reynolds.”

“You can just pass me the remote while you clean up this mess, Sugar Foot.”

By the time the previews were finished, I had the popcorn cleaned up. I brought my sleeping bag down from my bedroom and decided to let my little brother have the couch. The actual movie didn't start until about 10:45 p.m., but The Godfather was one of those flicks worth sitting through the previews for. We sat through the movie in silence. There was no laughter, no talking, and no tears. We loved watching gangster movies together. But the only times we were able to enjoy them was when Mom and Dad were not around. They were strict about us watching too much violence and sex on television. Actually, they were against us watching any violence and sex. They even censored us from watching those Beavis and Butthead cartoons. Tim got a kick out of those two, but I never really enjoyed watching MTV. After the credits from the movie finished rolling and the television screen went blank before turning into a picture of snow, Tim and I stared into each other's eyes...

“Don Timothy,” I said. Slowly, I made my palms kiss while my index fingers rested on my bottom lip.

“Yes, Godfather,” Tim replied in his deepest voice.

“I've brought you here today to discuss family business. Business that has survived for three generations, exactly three generations today! Ahhhh, Timothy, you look so confuse yet you look so interested in what I am trying to say. You have no idea why you're here, do you?”

“No, Godfather.”

“I am offering you a seat at this table. This Williams’ table that my great-great-grandfather built with his own hands. Bless his soul. Tonight, you will become blood, Don Timothy. Your loyalty has won you a place in this family forever.”

“Yes, Godfather.”

“Tim, can’t you say anything else besides, ‘yes and no godfather.’ You sound like a broken record. Don’t ever think about pursuing an acting career. Your ability to ad-lib sucks...”

“Yes, Godfather.”

“O.K., this reenactment is over. See if there’s any popcorn kernels stuck between the cushions, will yah?”

“Don’t get mad, Terry. Maybe if you would’ve bothered to suck on a Tic-Tac or two before you started blowing your hot breath in my face, I could get more than three syllables out at a time. And why do you have to always be the Godfather?”

“Cause I’m the oldest, stupid.”

“Yeah, you’re the oldest and you’re stupid. That’s why when Dad finds out you’re suspended from school again, you’re gonna get a spanking...”

I remember pouncing on his back like a bobcat. I could feel his knees buckle underneath us both as he groaned from the rug burns across his thighs. “Ahhh, my leg,” he groaned. “Get off my back, you big brute.” I placed my forearm under his neck and covered his eyes with my free hand while he kicked violently. Tim was claustrophobic and hated it when I made him feel suffocated. I didn’t want him to wake Ms. Reynolds so I loosened my hold under his chin and gave him a knuckle sandwich with the hand I used to cover his eyes. The fun only lasted about two minutes, but it felt like we had

been at it for hours. After I stood up and checked my elbows for any abrasions, I extended my forearm to Tim and helped him to his feet. With squinted eyes and steady hands, Tim and I started the showdown-- as we panted like two Saint Bernard's stranded in a desert. The sweat rained from our brows as I made the first draw. I reached for the left side of his waist with my right hand and back of his right shoulder blade with my left. Tim did the same. Our bodies locked, our ears touched, and we patted one another on the back.

"Terry, " Tim whispered, "what do you think about us joining our blood."

"What?"

"You know. Like in the movie. What do you think about us..."

"Cutting our thumbs and bleeding inside of each other, yeah right! You can barely survive rug burns. How you gonna cut your own thumb?"

"Yeah, I guess it is kinda stupid. Just after watching the movie. I thought. I just thought maybe we could promise to be there, you know? To always be there for each other."

"Hey, you're serious, aren't you?"

"I think so."

"Tim, we don't have to bleed in each other. We're already real brothers. They only did that in the movie because they weren't family members by blood!"

"O.K., Don Terry. I bring you into my house. My house that my great-great-grandfather built with his own hands. And you disrespect me, huh? You mean, you sit here under all this and tell me you're afraid. You tell me you're afraid of your own blood? This country was built with blood... sweat... tears.... the tears of thousands of

hard-working Italianos. My father, and his father, and his father's father gave their blood for you-- for us. And this is how you pay them back, Terry?"

"No, Godfather."

"Then it's settled. Tonight we shall swear on each other's blood. We shall swear that nothing on this earth will separate us from each other. Understood?"

"Yes, Godfather..."

I'll always remember that night. It was the first time either of us had ever promised each other anything. Well, you know, we occasionally promised to return each others CD's or to match the next load of sweat socks Mom washed. But we had never made a real promise of any kind. We always had fun reenacting episodes from each of The Godfather movies, but that night it was different. We talked with our arms folded across our chests and our bottom lips turned upside down, but inside I knew Tim took that moment just as seriously as I did. Eyes don't lie, and both of ours almost cried. But we couldn't. We couldn't because we had never seen anyone in the mob cry before. I was thirteen then, so Tim must've been eleven. Things were so much simpler then; they were just so much simpler.

The next morning was also quite memorable. Ms. Reynolds watched Tim and me eat our breakfast at the table and asked us forty different times why we were both wearing Band-Aids around our thumbs. It was nerve-wracking. I didn't mind her asking the questions; it was just that she seemed to think if she rephrased her questions that she would get a different response. And I couldn't stand it when she beat around the bush!

"So, Terry," she always started off. "Did you hurt your finger last night?"

"No, Ms. Reynolds, it's all right. Just a little cut."

“So, umm, Terry. You must have cut your thumb, huh?”

“Yeah, just a little.”

“Humph. Looks like your brother hurt his finger too. So, Terry, it didn’t hurt too badly when you hurt yourself, did it?”

“No, Ms. Reynolds,” I said. “Don’t worry about it... if you weren’t asleep on the kitchen table, maybe you could’ve prevented the accident,” I murmured under my breath.

“So, Terry, you wanna tell Ms. Reynolds what happened to your thumbs?”

“Sure,” I boasted. “After you fell asleep on the table that we’re eating on, Timmy draped a blanket over your back while I popped some hot buttery Orville Redenbacher popcorn. After we finished watching The Godfather Part I for the tenth time, Tim wanted to stick me in the thumb with a straight pin. But don’t worry, he sterilized it with your cigarette lighter you left on top of the mantle. After I almost bled to death, I wipe it off and stuck him back with the pin. Then I got us both some peroxide and two Band-Aids from the medicine cabinet. Want me to show you the pin we used?”

“Well, I never,” Ms. Reynolds replied.

I don’t know what came over me that morning. But I remember Tim choking on his Froot Loops before falling out of his chair. Water filled his brown eyes and milk gushed from his nose. I didn’t think it was that funny at first. But when I saw Tim drowning in the puddle of milk with little red and blue “loops” floating around him, I burst into laughter as well. “Boys, boys,” Ms. Reynolds yelled. “Let’s stop all this monkey-business and clean up this mess.”

That was the last weekend Ms. Reynolds ever baby-sat Tim and me. Tim always teased me for running her off, but I think it was her lung cancer that kept her from her

baby-sitting career. I do regret never telling her I was sorry for being a smart-ass, though. Looking back, I'm sorry for a lot of things I did...

The first year I went to high school was difficult. Besides being the little man on the totem pole, it was the first time I had ever been without Tim. Yeah, we still ate breakfast together in the morning and talked late at night in the dark. But everything in the middle was missing. There was no more walking with Tim to and from school, no more making sure no one called him "retarded" in the lunchroom, and very few Friday afternoons at Dawson's Creek—since I usually had to serve detention on Fridays for being late to my first period class earlier in the week.

"Come on, Terry," Tim used to beg me. "Promise me you'll be on time this week so we can go fishing."

"All right, already. I'm just not used to starting my classes at 8 a.m. I never thought I would really miss that extra hour."

"Well, I really miss going to the creek."

"I said I'll try harder, Okay? Brothers?"

"Yeah, we're brothers."

At bedtime, Tim started to do most of the talking. And I gradually became the one who fell asleep first. Usually, we talked about what we wanted to do together on the weekend and how great it would be when I got my driving permit. But the only thing I would remember about our conversation the following morning, would be Tim's plans for attending Central High School in two short years—with me.

"Hey, Terry," Tim would say.

“Huh?”

“You still awake, aren’t you?”

“Uh huh.”

“I can’t wait ‘til I can go to Central too. Then it’ll be just like it used to be. We can catch the bus together in the morning, and I’ll make sure we’re never late to first period. At lunch time, we could sit together and I’ll swap you my Fruit Roll-Up for your carrot sticks. I know how you hate raw carrot sticks. Do you think we’ll have gym class together?... Terry....Terry, wake up!”

“Huh.”

“You’re not going to sleep are you?”

“No. No, I’m listening, T.”

“I said, do you think we’ll have gym class together when I get into Central?”

“Yeah. You can do that.”

“...’Cause I’m gonna try to get in the same classes you’re in. If I can. I remember when we had library class together after Mrs. Beverly got fired. I used to pretend I needed to get up and find another book just so I could sneak past and slap you on the back of your neck—while you were looking at those dirty pictures on the Internet. You thought you were slick, didn’t you? Anyway, I’m gonna go to bed since you’re acting like you’re so sleepy. You need your rest anyway. I can’t believe you have nine classes every day. That’s ridiculous. How do you know which class to study for first? I know what I’m gonna have to do. I’m just gonna have to study for the classes I have before lunch at night. Then, while I’m at lunch, I’ll study for the classes I have in the afternoon. See, buddy, you just gotta learn how to beat the system. Don’t go against it,

let it work for you! Terry, are you up? I knew you stopped listening to me. Good night.”

“Mmmmm...”

By my sophomore year, I'd gotten use to not having Tim by my side all the time. I let my music teacher talk me into playing for our school's marching band, and I even joined the track team. As soon as I turned fifteen, I found a job working part-time for a newspaper stand about a block away from my school. Mom and Dad wouldn't allow my job at the newspaper stand to interfere with my schoolwork, so they only let me work on the weekends. I hated that I found myself having less and less time to spend with Tim—but the extra money was nice. I even made enough cash to start slowly improving my wardrobe.

During the football season, we had band practice every morning at 7 a.m. So breakfast with Tim became rare—since he didn't have to be at school until 9 a.m. But sometimes he set his alarm early just to eat with me. Then he would go back to bed for an extra hour. I liked being in the band, but I didn't particularly enjoy waking up when it was still dark outside. Yet even though I was late for practice every morning, I was on time for school. Mom and Dad were pleased when the school stopped giving me wake-up calls for my tardiness to first period.

Track was pretty cool too. Before I started running, I never really hung out with any other guys. I never felt I needed to. I had a little brother at home waiting to find out how my day went. But track practice started exactly 45 minutes after my last class every day. So there was not enough time for me to get home and make it back in time. So I

usually ended up lounging around the locker room until I heard Coach Martins whistle echoing off the basketball-stadium's walls.

That was a busy year for me. And Tim really did his best not to make a big deal about my absence from his life. He was always good about not making me feel guilty about things. But I figured he took it so well because, in his mind, he was counting down to the month and day that he would enroll in Central High. Most of my track meets were on Thursday and Friday afternoons, so there was rarely a Friday I had free to go fishing. But I never really missed it all that much because there was never a home track meet that I couldn't find Tim resting his chin on top of the metal gate by the finish line. He always had a white face towel in his left hand and a squeeze-bottle filled with ice-cold Tropical Punch Kool-Aid (with fresh orange slices floating on top) in his right. All of those days Tim and I used to race home to change our clothes must've paid off because whenever I knew Tim was there to cheer me on I couldn't help but remember how free I used to feel running home after school— knowing I had a pitcher of Kool-Aid waiting for me in the fridge and a little brother to share it with. I never lost a race when Tim was there. In fact, right after indoor track season, Coach Martins sent me to the varsity team. I was the only sophomore ever to run with the Varsity squad in the history of the school. And Tim was faster than me. Even though he never said anything about it, I knew he couldn't wait for the day he could run on the same track with me. It was that look in his eyes. It seemed to say, "Congratulations. But enjoy your victory now, 'cause next year you'll be choking on the dust I'm gonna leave in your face, brother!"

That summer, I worked full-time at the newspaper stand. I made a decent amount of money. Well, I thought I did before I started doing business with Randy. Randy was

one of those jocks at Central that did it all. That is, everything but his schoolwork. He wore nice clothes, drove a brand new car, played football and basketball and wrestled. In August, he would start his fifth year of high school, but it didn't seem to bother him much. He seemed to be a pretty cool guy. I just never really had the chance to get to know him. But, I knew he was in a gang, and I did my best to stay clear of anyone who had any sort of affiliation with gangs. There were plenty of gang members in the band and on the track team that I would consider my friends. But they knew that after the football game or track meet we had to go our separate ways.

One day while I was walking home from work, Randy pulled his 1999 black Dodge Intrepid to the curb and rolled down his tinted windows.

“Hey, little man,” he said. “Need a ride?”

“No, no thanks,” I replied. “I don't live far from here.”

“I know where you live. Hop on in it's raining.”

My mind told me not to get in the car, but my body told me it had had a long day and could use the lift. It was starting to rain a little harder and I didn't know how to say, “Sorry, but my mother told me not to accept rides from gang bangers.” I got in the car and was careful not to slam his door too hard. After I put on my seat belt I thanked him for picking me up.

“Don't mention it, little man. When I drove past here early this morning you were on the corner working your butt off. So I figured you of all people could use a lift.” I asked Randy to drop me off on the corner of my block because I didn't want my parents to see me getting out of his car. I knew if they saw me getting out of a car newer than theirs they would have a hundred questions about him and what his parents did for a

living. When the car stopped, I thanked Randy for the ride again and handed him two wrinkled one-dollar bills.

“What’s this?” Randy asked me. He pinched the arm of his sunglasses and pulled the frames down to the tip of his nose. “No, really, what’s that for?”

“A tip,” I said. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Hey, now, don’t insult me. I was already driving in this direction. And besides, you need this more than I do!” With the tip of his index finger, Randy slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“All right, I’m not gonna beg you to take my money.”

“You know what? You’re all right, little man. I like your style. There ain’t too many brothers out here who believe in putting in a hard day’s work and staying out of debt. Let me talk to you for a second...”

I just wanted to get in the house. But I didn’t want to be rude after he’d just given me a free ride home. Anyway, we ended up having about a twenty-minute conversation in Randy’s brand new Intrepid. He told me that if I worked for him next fall he would pay me \$200.00 a week. I knew he wanted me to do something illegal, so I asked him to release his power locks.

“Hold on,” he said. “Just give me one more minute, Okay?” He told me all I would have to do was stash his stuff in my locker every day, and give him back what he needed at lunch time. He told me no one would ever suspect I was holding down his goods, and if anything ever happened all I would have to say was that someone must have thrown the bag in my locker between class periods-- when I wasn’t looking. He gave me a speech about how, since I was only fifteen and had a clean record, the worst

that could happen to me would be a fine and court supervision. "...So you do the math, Terry. That's two hundred dollars a week just for letting me put a stash in your locker. That's more than you'll make working at that newspaper stand all weekend. Just think about it, man. You're talking about eight hundred dollars a month in cash. That's three thousand and two hundred untaxed American dollars you'll have in your pockets before next Christmas. And you won't even have to work. You can play your little trumpet in the morning, run track in the afternoon, and count your money at night! Just think about it all right?"

When I got out of the car, I had already made up my mind. There was no way I was going to let Randy use me to stash his drugs. But after working 40 hours per week at the newspaper stand all summer, that \$200.00 a week Randy had offered me started to sound about right. I started to do the math in my head. That's \$5.15 per hour, times 40 hours per week, minus FICA... I couldn't believe I was even considering Randy's offer. But I knew he would come looking for me on the first day of school.

August 15th came faster than I could have ever anticipated. Tim and I rode the bus to school together for the first time, and I was proud my little brother was going to be a Central High Cavalier, just like me. Randy didn't come to school at all for the first week of classes. So by the second week, I had thrown the idea of working for him completely out of my mind. I had to get Tim adjusted to his classes and finish introducing him to the rest of my friends.

"So what do you think," I remember asking Tim during our fifth-period lunch break.

“You know what I think, I’ve been waiting to come here for over two years. It’s gonna be great.”

“Yeah, it is. I can’t wait ‘til track try-outs. I’ve told Coach all about you. He said if you’re as good as I say you are, you’ll make it on our varsity team. They’re already short a half dozen long-distance runners.

“Really! But Terry, I want to run on the same team you’re on.”

“McFly, is anybody in there. Hello. Earth to Timothy. I do run for the varsity team. Listen, freshmen and sophomores run on the Frosh-soph Team while juniors and seniors run on Varsity.”

“Oh, that’s cool then.”

“Pssss, what am I going to do with you!”

By Wednesday, Randy decided to show up for the eighth day of classes. I tried to avoid him in the hallway, but he eventually showed up at my locker right after sixth period. I told him I couldn’t help him but I really appreciated the offer. After he walked away, I felt as if a ton of bricks had been elevated from my chest. I thought it would be easy saying “No.” But it wasn’t—not when a six-foot jock, draped with at least \$5,000 worth of gold around his neck, stands in front of you with a sinister look on his face. And it wasn’t easy letting him down when he seemed to respect my decision. I would have felt better if he had called me a couple of names, or at least head-butted my locker or something.

A month went by and everything in my life was going well. It was Tim I began to worry about. He made the team and was awesome on the track, but both his social life and academics were suffering. I didn’t worry too much about his social life because I

knew my little brother would want to suck up all of my time as soon as he got to Central. I didn't even start to hang out with my current friends until my sophomore year. But on the days Tim had an important math quiz, we both dressed alike and switched our class schedules. After the third quiz I took for him, I sat him down and explained why I refused to make a habit out of taking his tests for him.

"You know we can't make a habit out of doing this Tim."

Tim sucked his bottom lip into the roof of his mouth and stared at his toes for a couple of seconds. Slowly, his eyes scaled up my body until we both could see our own reflection in each other's pupils.

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing. It's unethical, dishonest, and does nothing but train you to depend on me whenever you need to be bailed out of difficult situations. And besides, it won't take your teachers too long to figure out we're swapping identities. You need to get yourself a tutor. If you don't maintain a C average, you won't be able to run on varsity or frosh-soph."

"Can't you tutor me, Terry?" Once again, Tim avoided eye contact by staring at his feet.

"I wouldn't mind tutoring you, but you know how tired we are when we come home from practice. I have a hard enough time doing my own homework.

"But what about on the weekends?"

"You know I work all day on Saturday and Sunday, Tim. I don't mind helping you when I can, but you need a regular tutor."

"Yeah, you're right. I know you would help me if you could."

“I’m sorry, Tim.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault you don’t have a lot free time. I know you work hard to do the things you do. I’m just gonna have to work a lot harder until I can find someone who can help me. And Terry...”

“Yeah, watsup, Tim.”

“I’m sorry about your job.”

My heart skipped a beat as I tried to think of how he knew about Randy and what I was supposed to say after I had just given him the spill on ethics and honesty. We used to share everything. And every night he asked me what was happening in my life, I managed to leave that minor detail out of our conversation. “W-w-what?” I said. It was the only reply I could think of. Tim had completely caught me by surprise.

“I’m sorry your newspaper stand got burned down. I saw the story on the news. I thought you didn’t say anything about it at dinner because you were upset about not having a job anymore.”

“No, I didn’t even know, Tim. But, thanks.” I can’t even describe how I felt at that instant. I was happy Tim didn’t know a drug dealer at school had asked me to work for him, but I was distraught about not having a job.

“Terry,” Tim called. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It looks like you’ve just found that math tutor you needed. So leave your Saturday and Sunday afternoons open. You’ve got a math class to pass.”

“Thanks, Terry.”

“No problem, Champ!”

The very next day, Randy was standing at my locker—right after sixth period. He stood with both hands in his jean pockets and sunglasses propped on top of his forehead. He was just stopping by to tell me how sorry he was to hear about the newspaper stand. But we both knew he was really stopping by to offer me the job again. I closed my eyes, swallowed, and nodded my head in acceptance.

“But let’s get one thing straight,” I said. “This is business, Randy. So stop coming to my locker before you give the whole thing away. Nobody thinks we’re friends, so let’s not give ‘em any suspicions. I have forty-five minutes after school before track practice starts. Can you pick me up by my old place of employment?”

“Sure, little man. Just act like you’re walking home and I’ll scoop you up.”

It was difficult coming up with an excuse why I couldn’t meet Terry in the locker room after school. But I ended up telling him I was meeting this cheerleader out by the bleachers. I met with Randy and straightened out our deal. He would give me \$100.00 every Monday morning and pay me the other half on Fridays, during my lunch period. In return, I would pick up his package every Monday morning from the trashcan in the men’s washroom on the first floor. Then before going to lunch, I would drop off half of the white, powdery baggies in the same trash can on my way to the cafeteria and the other half right after sixth period—on my way to my art class. This way, Randy would never have to come to my locker, and half of the drugs would always be out of my possession by noon. I figured the less I had, the safer I would be.

But Randy was indeed a dumb jock. Just two weeks after I started working for him, most of the members of his gang found it necessary to befriend me. Well, not really befriend me, but flash me with subtle gestures that let me know they knew I was working

for Randy. Sometimes they would leave messages on my desk like, "It's time to go pottee, Terry." But other times they would just wink while passing me in the hallways. I brought the situation to Randy's attention. But once I got used to a new crisp Franklin in my pocket every Monday morning, and an even crispier one on Fridays, his not too nimble-minded sidekicks seemed to matter less.

After about a month of this routine, I decided it would be best if Randy and I switched our drop-off and pick-up points on a daily basis. I didn't trust his friends knowing our business, and it was difficult trying to get Tim to just meet me in the cafeteria at lunch time. He had gotten used to meeting me at my locker before we walked down to lunch together. Randy was impressed with my idea about switching our different "points" around school. But I was disappointed that he hadn't thought of the idea himself. Soon after, he asked me if I wanted to make more money. The first question I asked was, "How much more?" The second one I asked was, "What exactly do I have to do?" He told me that he would give me an extra \$200.00 a week if I rode with him while he made his runs.

"What do you mean by helping you make runs?" I asked.

"It's simple," Randy said. "All you have to do is ride in the passenger seat and learn how to coordinate your pinky finger with my power windows. Whenever I tell you to roll down the glass, you just do it. Sometimes somebody will hand you some money. Sometimes you'll slip someone a package. It's pretty simple, track boy. All you have to do is let your fingers do the walking."

"And you'll give me an extra two-hundred for that?"

“You’ll be up to four-hundred dollars a week, little man.” Randy smiled—but it was more like a devilish grin. You know, the kind of smile you see when a person has too many teeth for the size of their mouth. “Not bad money for someone who used to work at a newspaper stand, huh.”

“Man, you can get anybody to do this. Why you asking me?”

“Hey, you’re right, mother fucker!” Randy yelled. “But I’m trying to hook yo sorry ass up with some serious cash. I can name a hundred people who would die to have someone like me offer them a job. You seemed like somebody with a straight head on his shoulders-- someone I could trust. Just listen for a minute, Terry. Half the mother fuckers I hang around would try to either use my shit or cheat me out of my own money. The other half have criminal records. But you, I trust. And your record is clean. If any shit ever goes down, you can walk. As a matter of fact, you can tell cops I was just giving you a ride home and you didn’t even know there were any drugs in the car.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to sound like I didn’t appreciate the offer and everything. I just...”

“Don’t worry about it. You would be a dumb ass if you didn’t worry about watching your back. That’s why I asked you, man. I figured you could watch my back and, in return, I could feed your empty pockets.”

“Well, when would we have to make these runs.”

“Whenever I said so. Sometimes right after school. Sometimes at night. If you’re serious about it, I’ll buy you a Motorola pager and just beep you when I need you, since I don’t have a phone at home. But I’ll end up needing you the most on the weekends.”

“Well, I think I can help you out sometimes. It’s just that I have practice after school, and I promised my little brother I’d tutor him on the weekends.”

“Listen, man, either you’re in or you’re out. I ain’t trying to come between your track career or your family, but this is serious business we’re talking about. You can’t be late, sick, or tired when I need you. I can’t be hearing no shit about you can’t leave because you’re doing homework.”

“Can I let you know after I think about it some more?”

“Terry, you’re still in your starting block after the pistol has blasted. Are you gonna run with me or just hope that the time keeper calls the race a false start? Hey, just run with me for a week. If you can’t hang, then we’ll just continue our normal business with no hard feelings, all right?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.”

I “ran” with Randy every day after school for one week. Then I ran with him for another one. Soon, I found myself running out of excuses to give to both Tim and Coach Martins. Tim knew I wasn’t really sick, and Coach Martin’s rule was that if any runner missed more than three practices without a note from either a doctor or the school nurse, he was cut him from the team.. The only ones I had under wraps were Mom and Dad. They thought I was still going to practice and still working on the weekends. Well, I was still working. I just wasn’t selling newspapers anymore. Tim ended up convincing Coach to give me another chance, and I went back to practice.

I had almost forgotten what it was like to run alongside my brother. He pushed me to my limit every day and I helped him develop his form. It was obvious that Tim was a natural runner. You know how some runners are just born to become sprinters

while others are made to run long distances? Well, Tim could run any race. He needed a lot of work with his form and technique because he never had any formal training. He just ran because he loved to. He ran kind of like Forest Gump... his upper body did whatever it wanted to, but his stride was long, strong, and graceful. I really enjoyed watching him improve each day. But as I watched Tim run around and around the track as our teachers pulled out of the adjacent parking lot for the day, I came to the conclusion that I'd rather make some more money than run track for Central. I loved Tim and all, I really did. But if I kept working for Randy, I knew I could save enough money to buy myself a car by the end of the school year. I didn't want anything fancy, just a little something to call my own.

I knew Tim would be crushed if I quit the team. So I staged a freak accident before practice the following afternoon. While everyone on the team was doing their warm-up laps around the track. I trampled over a high hurdle and faked a groin pull. Everyone laughed at first because they thought I had just hit my knee on the wooden beam. But when they figured out I couldn't get up on my own, they rushed over to help me. Tim ran and got Coach. I apologized to the team for goofing off at practice, and everyone knew a groin strain could keep me off the track for at least three weeks. That was perfect for me. I just needed to buy some more time to make my money.

That night, Tim got out of bed and turned all the lights back on before talking to me.

"You aren't even hurt, are you?" he asked me.

"Why did you turn on all the lights? I'm trying to get some shut-eye."

“Terry, why did you do what you did today? You’ve been acting weird ever since I got to Central.”

I hesitated because I knew Tim was staring at me. I rolled over on my side and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Is it me? If you don’t want me to run track I’ll quit. I’ll even ask Coach if I can just run on frosh-soph if you want. You’re the one who encouraged me to try out for the team. I never wanted to be a star or anything.”

“No, no, no. It has absolutely nothing to do with you, Tim. I just got a new job and I’m trying to save enough money to buy a car. But I need to work after school. I can’t do both!”

“Why didn’t you just say so! Where’s your new gig?”

“Well, it’s everywhere actually. This guy is starting his own delivery business, and I help him package stuff and deliver it to his customers.”

“Ahhh, kind of like working for UPS, huh?”

“Yeah, kind of like that!”

“Well, you be careful dropping off packages to strange people’s houses.”

“Yeah, I’ll be careful. But, Tim, promise me one thing....”

“Anything.”

“Not a word of this to Mom and Dad. I want it to be a surprise when they see I’ve saved my own money to get something I want.”

“No problem.”

For a month, everything was cool. I rode alongside Terry and helped him with his pick-ups and deliveries, but one day one of our pick-ups went sour. Randy pulled up in the alley behind the Amoco station on 79th Street and two guys walked up to my window. One was wearing a Chicago Bulls skull cap and the other one had a St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap on his head-- turned sideways. I rolled down the window and the taller of the two blurted "86" into the window. I didn't know what "86" meant. But the next thing I knew, Randy screamed, "What the fuck do you mean you don't have my goddamn money, mother fuckers!" I saw him reach under his seat for something shiny before he opened his car door. As the two guys started running, the one who wore the skull cap fell after I heard a loud blast echo outside of the car. I immediately covered my ears with my forearms and ducked my head in between my knees. Two more shots were fired before I heard Randy shut his door and put the car into reverse. I kept my head down as the car shook from side to side, leaves and other debris from outside falling all over me through my rolled-down window. After a couple of seconds, we stopped momentarily before I felt the car slip into a different gear. The wheels spun violently on the wet asphalt as I hit the top of my head on the keyhole to the glove box. When we seemed to slow down to the speed limit, I turned my head to the right and found the Up switch on the door panel. Once the window reached the roof of the car, I slowly sat up and quickly fastened my seat belt. My heart raced violently. I felt as if I had just won the 10K—all adrenaline, no pain. I didn't utter a word. I just sat there with my eyes peeled until Randy stopped the car and told me to get out. He dropped me off a couple of blocks from Central and I ran all the way home.

That entire week, I didn't say a word to anyone about what I'd experienced. I didn't even tell Tim. I watched the evening news and read every issue of the Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times that week—praying to God to let the guy with the skull cap survive the bullet wound. But you know what? His story never made the news. I knew he hadn't survived because there were a number of kids from school who lived blocks away from that gas station. I knew I should tell someone what had happened. But I couldn't. Even if my parents didn't kill me, who would stop Randy from shooting me in my back on the way home from school? And who would pay for my court costs? And who would keep Grandma from having a heart attack? I felt terribly guilty. But what could I do? I didn't know Randy would kill anybody. Can't you just hear that line holding up in court? I had nightmares about being in that alley for two weeks, before the real nightmare began...

“Good evening and welcome to the Channel 7 Evening News. I'm Bill Kurtis.”

“And I'm Sheryl Burton.”

Up next, the shocking story of Timothy L. Williams-- a freshman track star at Harriet L. Central Public High School who was shot once in the spine this afternoon while attempting to exit the North Building after track practice. The victim is currently in critical condition. No suspects have been found. But police officials say a red St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap was used to prop open the doors to the school...

Timmy survived. But he's paralyzed from the waist down. Every morning I help him into his wheelchair, I remind myself he's sitting in my place. That bullet was meant for me. And nobody knows it but Randy, the shooter, and I. I'll never tell the police

what happened now. It's already too much carrying the guilt around on my shoulders every day. I could never explain to Tim how my selfishness fucked up his life. I thought about suicide. But then I figured if I started running track again, maybe the shooter'll snipe me from the roof of the building. At least then I wouldn't go to hell for killing myself.

It's still painful. It hurts me to watch Timmy struggle to put on his clothes every morning. And it hurts me even more when he stares out the living-room window and says nothing. I know the inability for him to use his legs has already started to consume him from within. He never cries. Yet his eyes are always blood-shot. He never complains. Yet, he rarely smiles anymore. I know things will change in the future. Tim is strong—stronger than I'll ever be.

Today, I just live for today. I run my heart out during practice because now I run for my brother. The only way I can stand to live with myself is by becoming what Tim should have been. And I won't stop. I won't stop until he walks again, or until I bring him home the gold.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Describe the relationship between Timothy and Terry.
- 2) How did their relationship change throughout the course of the story.
- 3) When did Terry make his first mistake, in regards to befriending Randy?
- 4) What kind of parents raised Terry and Timothy?
- 5) Was Terry jealous of his brother's athletic abilities?
Why/why not?
- 6) What is the significance of the following quote, "My mind told me not to get in the car, but my body..."
- 7) Was Timothy an ethical person? Was Terry? How about Randy?
Explain.
- 8) If Randy wouldn't have shot at the two guys, would it have been worth it for Terry to continue doing business with him?
- 9) Will Terry ever tell his brother why the guy wearing the red baseball cap came looking for him?
Why/why not?
- 10) Do you know someone like Randy? How do you refrain from getting involved with illegal activities?
- 11) What do you imagine Timothy will do with the rest of his life?
- 12) Will Terry be able to live with guilt he feels?
- 13) Who is the strongest character in this story?

Fools in Love

Sherri and I always ate lunch together underneath the old elm. At exactly twelve o'clock, I'd race out the front doors and find her waiting for me on the bench. No matter which direction the wind was blowing her hair would always wave to me. Each wavy strand took the place of the words, "Here I am, Billy. Over here." Sometimes I thought her hair could say what her tongue never needed to. Every now and then, I'd present her with a carnation or even a sunflower-- since she liked it the best. But I always gave her a soft kiss on the cleft of her chin. Sherri, in return, would peck the tip of my nose. I always kissed her chin when I greeted her because it was a sure way of making her smile. And I'd do anything to see those dimples.

But today is different. Before I even push open the doors, I can tell either the wind is not blowing or Sherri has her hair pulled into a ponytail. I hope it's not the latter. Once outside, a brown paper bag sweeps across my shoelaces as my silk shirt flaps against my skin. Slowly, I stroll towards her before noticing she's sitting directly under the heart I carved in the bark over a year ago. I kiss her chin. My nose parts her lips, but the contact is far from a kiss.

"Hey, what's the matter?" I ask. I sit next to her and place my palm over her crossed knees.

"Nothing much," she replies.

"So what's up with the ponytail today?"

"Nothing," Sherri says. "I just didn't feel like doing all that curling and pinning today, that's all." Her eyes float up my body 'til they meet mine, then they sink before anchoring at my chest.

"What?" I say.

"What, what," Sherri says.

"What are you staring at?"

"Nothing, silly," Sherri says. "Don't be so paranoid. I was just admiring the charm I bought you for your chain. I'm glad you like it." She takes the end of the crucifix and twists it back and forth while it hangs from my neck.

"Ouch!"

"What are you jumping for?" Sherri asks.

"You just scratched me with your nails," I say.

"Stop being a baby."

We both smile as Sherri reaches in her book bag.

"Do you want turkey or roast beef?" she asks me.

"That depends on whether you made the sandwiches or your Mom."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she says. "But be careful how you answer."

Sherri tilts her head downward and stares at me from over the rim of her glasses. I try not to laugh at how funny she looks with just the lower half of her eyes magnified by her lenses.

"Don't look at me like that," I say. "Your mom puts pickles on any kind of sandwich. I hate pickles on beef."

"Okay. You better take this one, then." She hands me the brown sack labeled "Turkey."

I empty the entire contents of the bag on top of the bench before giving Sherri my ZipLock baggie full of carrot and celery sticks. Next, I consume the barbecue potato chips and oatmeal-raisin cookies before I unwrap the aluminum foil from my sandwich.

"Billy," Sherri says. "What do you plan on doing after you graduate in June?" She places her left hand on my right thigh before curling her fingers into a loose fist.

"Why?" I ask. "Do you have something freaky in mind following my strut across the stage?" Sherri firmly squeezes her index and thumb together while my flesh is sandwiched between her grip. "Ouch, woman, I was just teasing you."

"Now let's try this question again," she says. "What are you going to do after graduation?"

"We've talked about this at least a dozen times." I sink my teeth into the cold sandwich. "What do you want me to tell you?" I ask with Wonder Bread still stuck to the roof of my mouth

"The truth," she says.

"Do you have to know the truth, right now?" I ask.

"Yes, Billy. Can't we just have a decant conversation?" Her forehead wrinkles while her eyebrow's sink.

"I just want to play football," I say. "That's all I've ever wanted to do since I was a kid. You know that. I'll attend any university that wants to pay for my tuition and stuff. Mom reminded me all summer why she can't afford to send me to school. And I refuse to take out any loans. Do you know my brother owes twenty-thousand dollars in loans, already?"

Sherri bites her lower lip and peels the skin off with her teeth. She only does that when she's nervous.

"Are you paying me any attention?" I ask while taking another bite out of my sandwich. "Sherri!"

"Yes," she says. "I mean, I'm sorry, Billy. I must have been daydreaming."

"Yeah, sure you are. First you want to talk, but then you can't even listen."

"No, really, I am. It's just that...." Sherri stands up and sits on my lap. She takes her warm palm and softly places it against my cheek. My eyelids blanket my pupils.

"Billy," she says, "let me whisper something into your ear." As her lips move closer to my lobes, the sweet aroma of Liz Claiborne fills my nostrils. Her nose rests on the top of my ear as she whispers, "Billy, you're going to be a daddy soon!"

The turkey sandwich falls from my hand. Everything is silenced. The weight on my lap becomes too heavy to support. So I stand. I stand and look all around me. I see faces. Everyone is smiling, laughing, and joking. But I can't hear a damn thing. Things start spinning all around me. I'm inside the belly of the twister, watching glimpses of my life get sucked in and spat back out of the funnel. My right shoulder jerks violently as everything stops and returns to normal-- whatever that is.

"Billy," Sherri says. "What's the matter with you?"

I look down at her, wondering why she's holding on to my wrist with both of her hands. Her eyes begin to water; the mascara starts to bleed. My eyes fall. They fall past Sherri's face, past the scar on her right knee, and even past the laces in her tennis shoes. My eyes become fixed on the turkey sandwich I dropped underneath the bench. Dozens of ants frantically navigate themselves on top of the twice-bitten meal. And even more of the little scavengers pour out of the cracks in the concrete. My stomach becomes queasy. Sherri pulls my arm a second time.

"Billy," she says. "You're supposed to be..."

"What?" I say. "I'm supposed to be what? And stop pulling my arm. You wait

until lunch time to tell me this? Oh, what a wonderful surprise. Thank you, Ms. Jackson. Or do you think I should marry you tomorrow so you can be Mrs. Bowers? Am I supposed to be excited about having a baby nine months before I graduate? What? What am I supposed to be? Do tell me!"

"I thought. I thought you at least cared about....," Sherri says as a liquid diamond rolls down her cheek.

"I just need to think right now," I say. "I gotta go. Really, I've got to go now."

I snatch my wrist from her and begin walking towards the basketball courts. I can hear Sherri sniffing in the distance, but I don't dare look back. I walk up to the steel fence that surrounds the playground and fasten my talons onto the metal cage. With my forehead resting between my hands, I watch the guys try hard to impress the girls watching their game. Before long, the lunch bell rings and the students flee from the playground in order to be on time for their next class. I continue to hang onto the fence. I end up watching three class periods worth of basketball games before I realize school is over for the day. Still, I gaze at the empty basketball court through the metal links in the fence.

The blast from the starter pistol echoes across the track field, and I remember I have to get ready for football practice. I turn in the direction of the building and spot the turkey sandwich at least twenty yards away. An entire colony of ants swarms the site. It appears as though a heap of soil is moving underneath the bench. But I know what has attracted them to my favorite place for lunch. I jog to the bench for a closer look. Then I jump skyward before my toes land in the middle of the moving mass of blackness. Mayonnaise splashes southward. Mustard gushes out too. I stand on my right leg and

scrape the bottom of my sneaker against the edge of the bench. Some of the ants are still alive. Others are lost inside various ingredients. I feel better and worse at the same time.

I decide to tell Coach I'm sick and can't make practice today. He doesn't take it very well, but I haven't missed a practice in four years. On the way home, I think about my relationship with Sherri. As I walk past the bus stop, I think about the first time I noticed her. She was a freshman who came to school on the very first day of class without a book bag. I don't know how she made it all the way to the corner carrying nine books in her arms. But she did. After I offered her my duffel bag, I saw the sexiest dimples at Harper High School.

As I stroll past the library, I remember our first date. It took me two months just to get Sherri to meet me here after football practice. We were supposed to be studying for our English final. But I kept catching her catching me staring at her lips as she read to herself silently.

Each elm I pass by reminds me of, you know, that heart I carved our initials into last year. Suddenly, I recall exactly what I carved into that old tree: "S.J. and B.B. Forever."

I've got to call Sherri! My legs carry me faster than they did in that playoff game against Central High. When I reach the doorstep, I take out my keys and unlock the screen door. The storm door is never locked. So I press the handle and push it wide open. I don't bother to close it behind me because I need to catch Sherri before her mother takes her to piano lessons.

I dash into the kitchen and grab the cordless hanging on the wall. I press "Memory 2" so it will speed dial to the Jackson residence. The phone rings, but there is

no answer. My heart is still beating from the run home and my undershirt begins to absorb the perspiration from my armpits.

“Hello.”

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Jackson,” I say. “This is Billy.”

“Hi, Billy. How have you been?”

“I’ve been doing okay.”

“Billy,” Mrs. Jackson says, “I know you’ve called for Sherri, but she’s already outside in the car waiting for me to drive her to the studio. Can I have her call you back when she gets in?”

“Yes, ma’am. That’ll be fine.”

“Okay, you take care of yourself, all right?”

“I will,” I say. “Goodbye.”

“Bye, now.”

I turn the phone off and hang it back on the wall, fearing Mrs. Jackson won’t even give Sherri the message. Even worse, I doubt whether Sherri would return my call anyway—especially after the way I treated her earlier. I go into the basement and find Dad’s boxing gloves. Then I change my mind about putting any gloves on at all. I walk over to the punching bag and deliver a vicious uppercut to its midsection. “This is for being a jerk,” I say. Then, I snap two short jabs to its upper body. “And this is for being an ass.” I curl my toes backwards, raise my right knee, and thrust my heel into the swinging target. “And that’s for making her cry!”

Exhausted, both physically and emotionally, I collapse on the cold tile floor and notice the blood beginning to surface on top of my bruised knuckles. I watch my chest

rise and fall before my shoulder blades finally kiss the floor as well.

The phone rings, but I'm too tired to move. It rings a second time. "What if it's Sherri?" I ask myself. By the third ring, I'm already halfway to the top of the stairs. I pick up the receiver on the fourth ring.

"Hello"

"Hello," Sherri says. "Is Billy home?"

"Haaahh," I exhale. "Hi, this is me."

"Are you all right?" she asks. "Shouldn't you be at practice right about now?"

"Yeah, but I didn't feel like it today," I say, scratching my eyebrow with my pinkie finger.

"Billy, you think about going to practice in your dreams."

"Sherri," I say, "what I did to you... what I did to you today was pretty shitty."

There's a long pause. My eyes widen as I anticipate how she will verbally condemn my actions. But I can't even hear her breathing over the line. "I'm sorry. I really am. I'm sorry for being insensitive. I'm sorry for walking away at a time when you needed me most. I'm sorry for not apologizing to you sooner. I'm sorry for... you can stop me any time now."

"No," she says. "You're doing a pretty good job of being sorry all by yourself."

I can tell by the tone of her voice she has a slight smirk on her face.

"Okay," I say. "And I'm sorry for feeding your mom's turkey sandwich to those carpenter ants."

I can hear her trying to hold back her chuckle.

"You're such an ass," she says. "You never could be too serious about anything,

could you?"

"I'm serious about football."

"Yeah, I guess you are."

I can hear someone playing Bach's Minuet in the background. Whoever's playing must be an amateur 'cause it sounds as though they're playing the entire piece with only one hand.

"Aren't you supposed to be practicing?" I ask.

"Yeah, but Mr. Woodland is running a little behind schedule. I was going to wait 'til I got home to call you, but I couldn't. And he said I could use his phone while he finished testing another student."

"I'm glad you called, baby."

"Me too," Sherri says.

"Well, can we talk about our situation later?"

"I think we have to."

"So, call you tonight?"

"Why don't we just wait until lunchtime tomorrow," Sherri says. "I don't think it'll be too safe for me to talk about babies while my mother's home."

"Yeah, you're probably right, Sherri."

"Talk to you later, baby?"

"Yes. I love you."

"I love you too, Billy."

"Bye."

"Goodbye."

I hang the phone on the wall and begin thinking about my future. I love Sherri, but there's no way I'm ready to have a child. I'm only seventeen years old—Mom and Dad would kill me if they found out. And what would the college scouts say if Coach told them I was expecting a baby? I'd never get a scholarship to go away to school. I don't know where I'm going to get the money to pay for the abortion. But I'm going to need the money pretty fast.

It's five minutes to twelve and I swear that second hand is slowing down.

"Mr. Bowers," Mr. Thomas says, "is there a reason why you've been staring at the clock all period?"

"No," I reply. "Sorry for disturbing you, Mr. Thomas."

"Don't be sorry. Just come here and show the class how to complete the equation on page two hundred and thirty-five."

"Excuse me?"

"Come up here to the board and give us the answer to number thirteen."

As I walk to the front of the classroom, I hear the rest of the class snickering behind me. I have no idea how to solve the equation, but I know there's only a couple of minutes left in this class period. I pick up the longest stick of chalk sitting on the ledge and press it firmly against the green board. As I break the chalk inside my hand (with my second and third fingers), I let the two halves slip between my palm and fall to the floor. "Ooops," I say aloud. As soon as I stoop to one knee, the lunch bell rings.

"Fine job, Mr. Bowers. Time was truly on your side, today."

"Sorry about the chalk," I reply.

Quickly, I grab my textbook and portfolio before exiting the classroom. As I maneuver through the corridor, I place my pencil behind my left ear while using my left hand to guide me through the crowd of students. "Excuse me....'cuse me... my fault... excuse me," I repeat over and over again. Finally, I escape the building and spot Sherri sitting on the bench reading a red and white book. Immediately, I know there's a soft breeze coming from the east because Sherri's hair is flapping in the wind-- directly over her right shoulder. With only her left lobe exposed, I see she's wearing at least one of the gold earrings I bought her for Christmas. I thought she hated those earrings.

I greet her with her usual kiss and she bites my nose.

"Ouch," I say. "What was that for?"

"That's for being late," she says. "You know we have a lot to talk about."

"Hey, that's not my fault. It's like hell trying to get from the east wing to the left one on the third floor."

I sit down next to her on the bench. She places the book on her left side before we both grab each other's hands. Very abruptly, she scoots a little closer to me and stares into my chest with her caramel eyes. She breaks the silence.

"Well," she says. "How do you feel about us having a baby?"

"Ummm, I guess we need to find out exactly how far along you are."

"I went to the clinic two days ago," Sherri says hesitantly. "They said I'm about five weeks..."

"You went to the clinic without me?"

"Yes, I told my mother I wanted to go to the basketball game after school. And she said it was okay for me to miss my music lessons."

I release her left hand and wipe the perspiration off on the side of my pants leg. Slowly, I reach deep into my right pants pocket and pull out a green wad of paper-- bound by a rubber band. I hand it to Sherri. Her eyebrows turn inward as she begins to bite her bottom lip. The wind stops blowing and her hair falls.

"What is this?" she asks.

"What does it look like," I reply sarcastically. "I got the money you'll need for the, you know."

"No," she says. "I don't know."

"That's three hundred and fifty dollars for the abortion, Sherri. Don't worry, I'm going to go with you!"

"Just like that," she says in a cracking voice. "You've already decided without even discussing any other possibilities with me."

"I thought we discussed the other 'possibilities' when you decided to get on the pill," I say. "You told me it would be almost impossible for you to get pregnant, Sherri."

"Almost, Billy. That's the key word here. Al-most. How many times have you been told no contraceptive is one-hundred-percent effective?"

"Hey, don't give me a quiz on safe sex, Ms. 'I want to feel you, Billy; you don't have to put it on anymore.'"

"How dare you put this all off on me. Like you didn't have any choices to make. You're so selfish, Billy." The veins in Sherri's hands surface around her knuckles as the money crackles inside her grip. She throws the green wad of George Washingtons and Andrew Jacksons at my chest before rising to her feet. "All you care about is your dreams of playing in the NFL. What you fail to realize is that it's a dream. But this baby

is not a dream. It's a reality. There's a little baby growing inside of me, Billy." Her eyes redden as she stares at my crucifix. The tears race down her cheeks. "A baby can't stop you from playing football-- only you can! You know what? Fuck you, Billy. You may be able to run away from linebackers, but being a man is not a game." Sherri glances at the roll of money in my lap. Picks it back up and storms away.

"Well, that went pretty well," I say to myself.

Two weeks go by without me hearing a word from Sherri. I don't see her at school and she doesn't call me at home. I hate getting into fights with her because I'm always the one who ends up calling her to smooth things over. But not this time. I refuse to let her get her way. I know she's probably sad from going through with the abortion. And I know I should be there to comfort her. You know, in a way, I am kind of sorry. Sorry that I let my parents, football, and three-hundred and fifty dollars influence whether or not my child should be born.

As I sit in my chair watching television, I wonder what Sherri's doing right about now. I hope she's all right. If I she doesn't call me tonight, I guess I'll call her sometime tomorrow-- but just to check up on her. The telephone rings downstairs. "Ma," I yell, "can you get the phone?" A second ring echoes throughout the house. "Can somebody please get the phone?" It doesn't ring a third time.

At least twenty minutes after the phone rings, I hear Mom and Dad arguing about something downstairs. When I hear Mom mention Sherri's name, I grab the remote and press the Mute button. I crack open the door to my bedroom and place my ear inside the one-inch opening.

"So where did he get the money from?" Dad asks Mom.

"I gave it to him," Mom replies. "The boy lied to me about needing three-hundred and fifty dollars for his senior class trip by Friday."

"And you gave him that much money, in cash?"

"That doesn't even matter right now, Marcus," Mom says. "Her mother says Sherri's going to have the baby."

"What?" Dad yells. "How the hell are two children going to support a child? Where's Billy?"

"Downstairs. Probably playing video games in his bedroom."

Gently, I close the door to my room. As I gasp for air, my heart attempts to escape from my chest. The footsteps become louder as Dad approaches the door I'm standing behind. The doorknob twists and the door opens till it collides into the back of my head, buttocks, and heels.

"Get out of the way," Dad yells at me. "Let me in this God damn room."

I move from behind the door and run towards the bed as the cowhide is lashed across my arms and legs. With my head tucked behind my forearms, I back myself into a corner to help shield my flesh from the flurry of pain. Quickly, I slide down to my buttocks and bury my head between my legs. But the punishment continues until the metal buckle bangs into my knee.

"Ouch," I scream. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry. I just didn't know what to do." Dad must have heard the tears in my voice trickling through the I'm sorry's because he stops beating me. I wipe my eyes between my thighs before looking up at him. If he'd seen the water in my eyes, he would have beaten me even more. Dad always said,

"Crying is for girls, Billy. Tears are a sign of weakness that you should never let leave your eyes." I keep my head bowed low as Dad continues to tower above me.

"Billy, I'm very disappointed," he grunts. "Clean yourself up and get upstairs so your mother and I can have words with you."

"Yes, sir." I sniffle.

Mom and Dad have been talking to me for what seems like five or six hours. Actually, Mom hasn't said too much. But only because Dad won't let her get a word in edgewise. We've talked about everything, from how I would support a new born baby to what I would do about going away to college next fall. Dad lays all of my options on the table and assures me in the end the choice is mine: "You're a man now, Billy," Dad says. "You can do what's convenient for you at this time in your life or you can save your soul." I chuckle. Not because I find my predicament amusing, but because every time Dad lectures me, he gives me a choice without really giving me one.

After our conversation, Mom and Dad sandwich me between themselves and kiss me on the top of my head. "We love you, Billy," Mom whispers to me. "Your father and I just want you to grow up to be a responsible adult who can make the right decisions." They excuse themselves from the kitchen table. I wait for the door to close behind them before I rise and push my chair underneath my place-mat. I run the tips of my fingers along the stucco wall leading into the basement. Once inside my bedroom, I think about how I'm going to get back with Sherri, and exactly what I'm going to say. She'll probably use her Caller I.D. to screen her phone calls, and e-mail is too impersonal. Damn, there's

no way I can hunt her down at school without causing a scene. Wait a minute. I've got it! I'll make her an audio tape of my feelings. This way, I can say everything I want without any interruptions. And she can hear the "truth" as much as she likes.

I find a blank tape inside my nightstand and place it upside-down inside my tape-recorder. I place it on top of my pillow and plug it into the socket behind my headboard. Perfect. My palm supports the weight of my head as I prepare my words for Sherri. I press the Play button and the reels start spinning:

Sherri, you were right. Football is my life. But you're also wrong. It's not the only thing I care about. I care about you. I always have. Touch your right knee for a moment. Remember the time you tripped over Victor's trombone? I untied my lucky handkerchief from around my head and pressed it firmly over your gash. Then I cradled you in my arms, before carrying you inside-- all the way to the Nurse's office. You stained my "hanky," baby! But I haven't lost a game since you returned it to me.

I didn't walk away from you because I didn't love you. I didn't walk away because I didn't feel you were good enough to be the mother of my child. I walked away because I wasn't ready to picture myself as somebody else's Dad. Can't you understand that? That wasn't my money I gave you for the abortion. I had to lie to my Mom to get it. I've never lied to Mom! And now, she'll probably never trust me again. Sherri, at the time, I just wanted it all to be over and done with. I didn't want to sit down with you and figure out the right thing to do. I guess I didn't want to have to grow up so fast-- especially if I didn't have to. It's hard enough for me trying to pass Mr. Thomas' class. Pssssss, this is already my second time taking geometry.

I sit on the edge of the bed and begin cracking my knuckles.

Sherri, I know you're probably sick of me babbling on and on. But there is a point to all of this. Just give me another minute or so, please. Baby, I want to be there for you and the baby. Tomorrow... well actually today when you listen to this tape, I would have already quit the football team. Don't worry, I still plan to go to college next fall. I'll just have to go to a junior college here in the city for at least a couple of years. After you graduate and the baby is old enough, maybe we can both get a scholarship, or at least Financial Aid, so we can go to a college where I can play ball.

Hopefully, I'll have a job by next week. The McDonald's by my house is hiring, you know. And I'm pretty sure my friend Shamone can hook me up with a job! Let's do this together, Sherry. I remember you telling me, 'being a man is not a game.' I'm ready to be a man. Are you ready for me to be yours?

I reach over towards the pillow and press the Stop button. Tomorrow, I'll slip the tape into Sherri's locker.

Two days later, I spot Sherri sitting underneath the old elm. As I walk towards the bench, her eyes leave the black and white page she's reading and glance in my direction. Our eyes kiss, before she runs towards me. I spread my arms wide. We embrace. Sherri's hair wraps around my neck as her dimples sink deeper and deeper. I can't remember a time when I've felt closer to her.

"I can't believe I'm supposed to graduate next month," I say to Sherri.

"I can," she replies. "It's been a long year, but we've almost made it." She grabs my hand and places it on the sphere that's been hiding under her garments for the past eight and a half months. "Can you feel him," she says. "He's kicking again."

"No, I think I missed it."

Sherri slides my hand towards the base of her stomach. "How about now?" she asks. "Can you feel him, now?"

"Yeah, I can feel the little munchkin trying to get out," I reply. "Hey, how do you know it's a boy."

"Intuition, my dear."

"Okay," I say. "But if it's not a boy, we're gonna have to put 'em back!"

"Yeah, right," Sherri laughs. She loops her left elbow inside my right as the nurse approaches us.

"Ms. Sherri Jackson?"

"Yes," we both say in unison.

"The doctor is ready to see you," the nurse replies.

I help Sherri to her feet and escort her out of the waiting room. We follow the nurse down a long corridor 'til she leads us into a small room with Dr. Larson's nameplate positioned on the door.

"If you would just stand right up here," the nurse says to Sherri. After she measures Sherri's weight and takes her blood pressure, she jots down a few notes on her clipboard. "The doctor will be here shortly," the nurse tells us before closing the door behind herself.

We sit silently in the claustrophobic room for what seems like twenty minutes-- holding hands. I begin reading the poster on the wall entitled: Birth Control Pills... Facts and Fallacies.

"What are you staring at, baby?" Sherri asks.

"The poster," I say. "I can't believe they advertise it like that. Like it's really worth the bother."

"Well, my mother says they're worth it," Sherri says. "She told me to ask Doctor Larson about prescribing some for me." Sherri turns to her left and smiles.

I turn to my right and stare into her soft brown eyes. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, silly," she says. "Mom told me I need to start looking into various kinds of contraceptives. She said if I would have been on the pill in the first place, we wouldn't be having..." Sherri refrains from finishing the rest of her sentence. Her dimples disappear as fast as her chin droops.

My fists clench tight. "What the fuck did you just say?"

Sherri gets to her feet as fast as she can manage and places her palms in front of my face. "Wait, Billy," she says. "I love you. I just wanted us to always be together. I'm sorry!" She bites her bottom lip.

I reach for the glass jar full of tongue depressors. "You... I can't believe this shit!" With the jar held behind my head, I aim for the ceiling.

At that very instant, the door swings open as Dr. Larson walks in. "Good morn..."

Splinters of glass slice the walls and tongue depressors rain from the ceiling.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What is your definition of love?
- 2) Did Sherri and Billy truly love one another?
Explain?
- 3) What is the theme of this story and why it is important?
- 4) What has this story taught you about the consequences of engaging in premarital sex?
- 5) Who are the victims in this story?
Why?
- 6) Who is to blame for Sherri's pregnancy?
Why?
- 7) How does Billy react when he learns of Sherri's pregnancy?
Did sympathize with his initial reaction? Why/why not?
- 8) How did Billy's parents react?
- 9) What would you do if you earned today that you were expecting a child?
- 10) In Sherri and Billy's case, should abortion have been an option?
- 11) Does Billy overreact in the doctor's office?
Why/why not?
- 12) What do you think the couple will do next?
- 13) How has Sherri's life been altered? How has Billy's?
- 14) Describe what goes through Billy's mind when he says, "She'll probably use her Caller I.D. to screen her phone calls and e-mail is too impersonal."

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This novel consists of a series of alternating first-person monologues by the book's lovers, Franklin and Zora.

McMillan, Terry. How Stella Got Her Groove Back. New York: Viking, 1996.

In this novel, the lead character, 40, meets a 20 year old Jamaican student whom she eventually marries. Stella realizes that she has a lot to live for and discovers the individuals in her life who matter most.

McMillan, Terry. Waiting to Exhale. New York: Viking, 1992.

Some critics claim that this novel consists of male-bashing. I found McMillan's story to highlight the importance of sisterhood between African-American women.

Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Knopf: Random House, 1987.

In this novel, Morrison uses historically-based fiction as a medium for addressing the (racially motivated) physical and psychological torment inflicted on African Americans slaves by southern whites. Beloved is a powerful novel about the wounding and healing powers of memory.

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

This novel is framed with a deconstructive dialogue with the Dick and Jane children's books. The white ideals of beauty are oppressive determinants of Pecola's identity throughout this story. Pecola's wish for blue eyes reflects an entire community that is absorbed by white ideas of what is beautiful.

Morrison, Toni. Song of Solomon. New York: Knopf, 1977.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison struggles with American capitalist success. The issue of colonization is an on-going thread throughout much of her work.

Morrison, Toni. Sula. New York: New American Library, 1982.

In this novel, Morrison's characters and communities struggle with colonization. Nel is one character who is raised in accordance with white ideas of beauty. It comes back to

haunt her at the conclusion of the book.

Welch, James. The Death of Jim Loney. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

This novel has been described as a melodrama, but it can also be viewed as a tragedy. Jim Loney's suicidal death is an expression of his inability to escape his disastrous fate. He discovers parts of his past that end up haunting him in the end. Welch depicts survival as an act of finding a balance between his tribal origin and the dominant culture he has become a part of.

Welch, James. Winter in the Blood. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.

In this novel, the first-person narrator recognizes that old Yellow Calf is his grandfather. This secret connects the speaker with his Indian roots and makes it possible for him to deal with the guilt of his brother's death. Violence is directed towards the body in this novel—but only in a ritualized and symbolic manner. Welch truly makes gallant efforts towards helping his readers appreciate American Indian culture(s).

Theoretical Bibliography

Crothers, Taylor. "Hazing Days: the Fraternity Initiation Remains the Most Secret of Campus Rituals - and the Most Debauched." The New York Times Magazine, (1996): 50- 57.

This essay addresses issues concerning why fraternities continue to haze potential members of their organizations—despite harsher legal penalties and university sanctions.

Daniel, Janice. "Redefining Place: Females Covert in the Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman." Studies in Short Fiction 33 (1996): 69-75.

This critique investigates why the strong woman is Freeman's primary type of character. Daniel explores the consequences of a woman's strength in terms of dealing with men, customs, etc.

Ehrle, Lisa. "Freeing the Creative Writer: An Introductory Lesson." English Journal 79 (1990): 61-66.

This essay proposes strategies for maximizing the creativity of aspiring writers. Ehrle recommends a host of prewriting exercises along with ways to inspire writers to think critically.

Gose, Ben. "Efforts to End Fraternity Hazing Have Largely Failed, Critics Charge." The Chronicle of Higher Education 43 (1997): A37-39.

In short, this essay advocates harsher sanctioning for individuals who are found guilty of fraternity hazing. But it also mocks how ineffective recent efforts have been. Because of the long history of hazing in some fraternities, Gose is pessimistic about significant changes in the near future.

Gray, Donald. "Writing Across the College Curriculum." Phi Delta Kappan 69 (1988): 729-34.

Donald Gray revisits classroom writing practices and the effects of statewide reform on writing instruction.

Hunter, Maclean. "Parenting After Divorce: Shared Responsibility Would Replace Custody." Maclean's (1998): 88-95.

This article stresses the importance of increased parenting after divorce. According to Hunter, the roles of a parent increase after divorce because of the psychological trauma that may result-- due to the separation within the familial unit. Some adolescents who experience parental divorce are more susceptible to leaving their homes.

Huntley-Johnson, Lu. "How to Do How-to Books: Real-Life Writing in the Classroom." Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 41 (1997): 172-77.

This article recommends a host of prewriting exercises for students. Huntley-Johnson recommends that teachers give writing assignments that address issues their students deal with on a daily basis.

Ku, Leighton. "Neighborhood, Family, and Work: Influences on the Premarital Behaviors of Adolescent Males." Social Forces 72 (1993): 479-88.

This essay address the effects that society can have on adolescent males. Ku says some males view paternity as a source of masculinity.

Landry, David. "How Old are U.S. fathers?" Family Planning Perspectives 27 (1995): 159-66.

Landry attempts to illustrate a national epidemic of teenage fathers in the United States. He does not offer much insight in terms of prevention.

Leak, Jeffrey. "An Interview With Brent Wade." African American Review 32 (1998): 427-34.

Leak says author Brent Wade believes that structure and form are essential to writing fiction. Wade admits there are added pressures on African-American writers because there are specific things that both the black and white communities expect from them.

Marsiglio, William. "Adolescent Males' Orientation Toward Paternity and Contraception." Family Planning Perspectives 25 (1993): 22-28.

William Marsiglio seeks to prove that while embarrassment over using condoms is decreasing, usage may also be declining.

Mattison, Alice. "The Joys of Interrupting For A Novelist Who Teaches." The Chronicle of Higher Education 43 (1997): B6-8.

Alice Mattison promotes the self-gratifying experience of teaching. She also recognizes how beneficial it is for students to learn under a teacher who is published.

Merkin, Daphne. "Reading Ahead: New Writers Keep the Fictional Faith." The New Yorker 74 (1998): 105-111.

This article highlights evidence that supports the belief that more and more young writers are writing fiction.

Murphy, Joseph. "Increased Condom Use Among Teenage Males, 1988-1995: The Role of Attitudes." Family Planning Perspectives 30 (1998): 276-281.

Joseph Murphy addresses shifting attitudes in regards to condom use among teenage males.

O'Brien, Charlotte. "A Large-Scale Assessment to Support the Process Paradigm." English Journal 81 (1992): 28-33.

This article discusses the writing process and where teachers should lead their students in the future.

Pennell, Melissa. "The Liberating Will: Freedom of Choice in the Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman." Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman. (1991): 207-220.

Melissa Pennell's essays highlighted the power of freedom of choice in the works of Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Rotenberg, Ken. "The Role of Primary and Secondary Appraisals in the Negative Emotions and Psychological Maladjustment of Children of Divorce." Journal of Divorce and Remarriage 43 (1988): 43-50.

Rotenberg discusses the ages when children are likely to suffer the most from parental divorce. He offers examples of how to intervene during trying times.

Sensenbaugh, Roger. "Process Writing in the Classroom." Journal of Reading 33 (1990):382-90. February

This essay stresses the importance of pre-writing and using heuristics as a tool for the writing process.

South, Scott. "Children's Residential Mobility and Neighborhood Environment Following Parental Divorce and Remarriage." Social Forces 77 (1998): 667-77.

Scott South's essay discusses how society can positively and negatively affect a child in terms of helping him/her cope with parental divorce.

Taff, Mark. "Fraternity Hazing Revisited Through a Drawing by George Bellows." The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) 269 (1993): 2113-2120.

Taff helps to illustrate the historical significance of fraternity hazing.

Talbot, Bill. "Writing For Learning in School: Is It Possible?" Language Arts 67 (1990): 47-55.

Talbot says the writing process takes a tremendous amount of intellectual power. He questions how teachers can take the fear out of writing for their students.

Warner, Sharon. "Matter of Fact: Fiction Writers as Researchers." The Writer 111 (1998): 10-15.

Warner says the best fiction writers are indeed researchers. She explains how a great deal of research can impact an author's fiction.

Whispers, Washington. "Greek Tragedies." U.S. News and World Report 20 (1996): 26-29.

This essay highlights the negative effects of hazing. Whispers does not go so far as to say Greek organizations don't provide unity for their members, but he does question how far some organizations go to continue their traditions.