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BRATS:  
A MEMOIR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Timothy James Heath

August 2013

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

BRATS:  
A MEMOIR

By

Timothy James Heath

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### BRATS: A MEMOIR

by Timothy J. Heath

There are two Americas. There is the America where families grow up generation after generation in the same geographic location. There is another America. This America moves populations about as if they were post-it notes attached to a bulletin board. Today, Great Lakes, tomorrow, Fort Carson, next week, Fort Wainwright, and so on. In this America, children rarely spend more than two years in the same location. Many are uprooted in the middle of a school year, often the senior year. Many do not know where home is, as their sponsor (the family member in the military) has not lived there in many years. The children of this nomadic group cling to its brand name, Brats, as tenaciously as the owners of Apple or Ralph Lauren do to their products.

Brats are the children of people in the military. They often go to school on military installations, belong to organizations sponsored by the military, shop at the Commissary, and buy their clothes at the "Exchange." Whatever community they live in, they know that they are often viewed as outsiders.

What is life like for these children? What is it like living in the shadow of an authoritarian organization or a household ruled by an authoritarian parent, often the patriarch? As these children shift from location to location, how are they affected by the constant creation and destruction of personal relationships? This book gives an unvarnished view into the world of brats.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the aid of my parents. I know they loved me in their own way, or at least they said they did. I am especially grateful to my father for not killing me and to my mother for constantly yelling, “Not on the head, Gene, not on the head,” when my father beat me.

I wish to thank my wife, Annie Joy Heath, for coercing me into the MFA program at San Jose State University when all I wanted to do was buy a ranch in Northern California and raise goats for cheese. You might have been right, Annie, about this program doing more for us than a herd of billy goats and some high desert land in the Warner Range.

There have been many professors at San Jose State University, especially in the MFA program, who have influenced me during my time in the program and as I wrote my thesis. Alan Soldofsky opened every door in the program for me and got me off to a wonderful start with his ENGL 203C course. Cathy Miller read and commented on much of the “junk” I submitted to her as I searched for and finally found my “voice,” that magic way into the mind of others that differentiates a wordsmith from an artist. Finally and most appreciatively, I wish to thank Professor Susan Shillinglaw, Steinbeck Scholar and the 2012-13 President’s Scholar at SJSU, for saying “yes” to my request to be my thesis chair. She guided and directed me to a successful conclusion of this arduous process and did not once lose her temper or become upset with me. She offered nothing but sage advice, scholarly insights, and

a helping hand that few ever get and even fewer deserve as I endeavored to complete my thesis. Thank you.

I would be remiss if I did not thank my other thesis readers. It is not until you ask an overworked member of the faculty to read your thesis that you find out who your friends are. My friends for life are Professor Samuel Miao, my second reader, and Ms. Judith Hilliard, my third reader. Both of you are very special to me and I could not have achieved this measure of success without your support! Thank you.

I would like to dedicate this work to my sister, Jeanne Marie Heath, and my brother, Brian Charles Heath. I will miss both of you forever.

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## Preface

Growing up in a military family is different in many ways from growing up in one residing in one residing in a settled civilian community. I lived in three different states before I was six-months old. I attended three first grades in two different states, Illinois and Michigan, and three high schools in two different states, Alaska and Texas. Ultimately, I would attend nine different schools before I graduated from high school. When I was three years old, my father went off to the Korean Peninsula to fight in a long and bloody war. He returned when I was five, and I barely remembered him.

A military installation is like an island fortress. The citadels my family called home had names like Camp Carson, Fort Leonard Wood, Fort Wainwright, Fort Richardson, and Fort Hood. Residents of these bastions needed special stickers on their car's windshield to gain access. Sometimes a special identification card was the passport to entry. These self-contained metropolises were often located in wooded wastes or frozen arctic tundra miles from any large cities or civilian settlements. A sense of insularity was ever present. Our lives were built around the facilities the military saw fit to locate on these installations. To purchase groceries, we shopped at the commissary because it advertised that its products were 25-40% cheaper than the grocery stores' and often 10-20 miles closer. We shopped at the PX, short for Post Exchange, because items there were significantly less expensive

than “out in town.” If we were ill, our moms took us to the dispensary for medical care. There were even dentists to fill our teeth and cheap gas to fill our cars. First-run movies and service clubs were provided to meet our entertainment needs.

The offspring of members of the military are called “brats.” It is a term of endearment, a brand name as meaningful to us as Apple, Ralph Lauren, and BMW might be to users of those products. All one brat has to say to another brat is, “I’m a brat,” and there is an instantaneous connection, a bond between two strangers, because both have shared many experiences such as frequent unplanned and unwanted moves, changes of school, loss of close friends, and loss of community.

Brats behave differently than their civilian counterparts. Rowdy children are the responsibility of the active-duty member of the family. Housing is free on these vast forts, but it is a privilege, not a right. An out-of-control child can cost a soldier his or her on-base housing. Parents and the military community at large keep their children under constant scrutiny for proper behavior.

In my family, children were treated like valuable toys that daddy kept in a special box on a shelf in his closet. When guests came over, we were taken out of our box and put on display. We were asked or expected to do tricks and shine like very expensive toys so that everyone could witness the greatness of our father and the happiness of our Army family. My father’s behavior was not unusual. Every aspect of a soldier’s life could be used to give or deny a promotion.

Many of these families operated like miniature military units. The general is the active duty member in the family. This was almost always the father. A

general's orders were never to be questioned. Those who questioned orders, hesitated in fulfilling orders, or in any way acted independently of the general's orders were severely punished until all independent thought was driven from their minds.

In addition to being a military family, ours was an Irish-Catholic family as well. Daddy was the pope of our family as well as its general. Catholicism supported his form of martial law and made it stick by also making it a mortal sin to have an independent thought or an out-of-place urge. Nothing was permitted, and everything was repressed unless the general assented.

My days as a brat ended just as the war in Viet Nam began to escalate and my life lacked some of the trauma that today's brats face as one and, sadly, sometimes both parents go off to war. But there are other themes that endure whether there is war or peace. Among them are the endless moves often during the school year. My sister began her senior year in Missouri and ended it at a high school only miles from the Arctic Circle in Fairbanks, Alaska. Shy or introverted children might need years to make friends, and just as links to the outside world are being forged by the quiet ones, permanent change of station orders (PCS Orders) arrive for the family followed by the moving trucks, the withdrawals from schools, the gathering of shot records and passports, and in many cases the sudden absence of a parent who may be off to war or some remote bastion. The life of brats is disjunctive, and many spend a lifetime trying to locate that thing called community.

Influencing my writing is the work of Frank McCourt. McCourt did not come to writing as a young man. His first major work was published after he turned sixty-five. McCourt was born in America, of Irish parents, who took him to Ireland when he was four. At nineteen, he returned to America. I find McCourt's story inspiring because, in many ways, it reflects my own progress through life. My mother was born of Irish parents, but by the time she was six her mother had died of tuberculosis. Her father sent his daughters to an orphanage and then returned to Ireland. I will be the same age as McCourt when my thesis is completed, and I reflect on my life in much the same way as McCourt does his as he begins *Angela's Ashes* with these words, "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all" (11).

I imagine many of us have this thought, and yet how few of us share our moments with the world and through that process inform the world. We also learn more about ourselves. In *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt shares the voice and perceptions of a child growing up in an Irish slum, afflicted by both the physical decay of its tenements and the moral decay of an ecclesiastical class that has lost touch with its flock. Luckily for the author, the child lives and grows far beyond young adulthood. McCourt presents his world in a matter of fact manner but also with savage irony as he takes on issues of family, parental responsibility, rejection by the Church, and much more.

McCourt tells his tale in a way that draws empathy from the reader but avoids the tone of self-pity and sadness. Readers generally feel that McCourt got a

raw deal in his early years and that the responsible persons did not do their job well. The sense that things were not as they should have or could have been rings clear in his memoir, but it is the use of irony that creates the story and makes readers want to plow on through his book. An example of this occurs when his mother attempts to get Frank into an esteemed school in her city so that he can get an education that will lift him out of poverty. The scene ends with the parish priest slamming the door shut on the face of this pleading mother. The seriousness of the situation and the lack of charity on the part of the Church's representative create the feelings that McCourt wishes his readers to suffer. Readers feel the pain of rejection as much as McCourt and his mother. It is that same sense of things gone wrong in a rational world that I want to bring to my memoir. Much sadness and pain will be a part of my memoir, but the glory of a life is less the sadness and pain and more about overcoming those aspects of life.

Another significant influence on my writing has been Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*. In that work, Wolff recounts his teen years by providing the reader lessons both in the geography of the land as well and of the human heart and mind. He begins with his mother's escape from a cruel lover in Florida and describes the trip that they take in her jalopy en route to Utah where his mother has heard that the land is flush with riches only waiting for the eager hands that will gather them up. Wolff sets all this up for his reader in the first few pages of his book. After this opening, the memoir becomes a page-turner.

Wolff's voice is never accusatory, because that would not create the empathy he seeks for his character. He avoids being judgmental and evokes the pain of his character in such a way that the reader, in a sense, feels the pain and suffering of the protagonist. To accomplish this, he creates scenes where characters work out their drama for the reader, who then applies values such as "good" or "bad," "honest" or "dishonest" upon the people who have woven their way into his life. One character in particular, Dwight, has a great deal of influence on Wolff's teen years. Layer by layer, Wolff adds to this character's complexity. Without Wolff overtly stating that Dwight is disgusting, the reader detests this man yet feels great empathy for him at the same time. I plan to use this technique in developing my characters, all of whom are as real as those in Wolff's narrative. In particular, I describe my father in a way that gives as much range of development to his goodness as it does to his less likeable qualities. My mother is a character of substantial depth as my memoir unfolds, and how she managed to hold on to her sanity within the confines of the prison my father created is an inspiration for me.

Wolff ends his memoir just as he leaves for college. I plan to do the same thing. In my case, there is a clear break in my life at this point in time. I moved from Fort Hood, Texas to Tampa, Florida to begin my first day of college at the University of South Florida. At that time, forces larger than anyone could understand required young men my age to register for the draft. Frank McCourt also ends his memoir on the cusp of adulthood.

Another significant influence on my writing is Anne Fadiman. Her short work, *At Large and At Small*, has greatly influenced my writing. Fadiman has shown me how a writer creates a good piece of writing. I studied her essays looking for the means by which she put her words together. After reading many of her essays, I began to understand how she wrote interestingly without wandering far from her chosen theme. I began to employ this technique in my own essays in my final ENGL 242 class to great advantage. In previous workshops, I often ran into this problem: “You have two stories here” (sometimes it was 3 or 4 stories). Fadiman helped me to overcome my wanton verbal ramblings and to remain focused on the main story I was telling. I will be forever grateful to her and to Professor Susan Shillinglaw who selected this work as a text in that workshop.

*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* reminds me how beautiful life can be. All that happens to us has happened before to others. We can take comfort from life’s simplest things. When reading the *Journals*, a reader gets a different impression of the Wordsworths (William was England’s Poet Laureate) as she describes their excitement while waiting for the delivery of a wagonload of manure that she and William will then apply to their vegetable garden. This joy of life in Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal keeps me reading it year after year. Late in February this year, my wife, the writer Annie Joy Heath, and I looked out at a moon and two planets setting in the western sky. Dorothy Wordsworth captured the same moment 210 years earlier almost to the day as she wrote, “We then walked toward Goan’s. The moon was a good height above the mountains. She seemed far and

distant in the sky, there were two stars beside her, that twinkled in and out, and seemed almost like butterflies in motion and lightness. They looked to be far nearer to us than the Moon” (102). I want to capture the joy of life, as does Wordsworth; additionally, she has influenced me to keep up with my journal writing on a daily basis.

The final influence I want to mention is my mother. She rarely read to me when I was a child, but almost every night before I went to sleep, she would tell me stories. These stories were so entertaining that my brother and I would ask her to repeat them to us night after night. I was in fifth grade when the stories stopped, but by then I knew I wanted to tell stories too.



# Part I

## Camp Carson to the Michigan State University Campus

### 1

Jeannie had a Tony doll that momma bought her for her first birthday at Camp Carson in Colorado. The doll came with a blue metallic case that held not just the doll, but also a large wardrobe of clothes many of which had fancy buttons and clasps, all sewn on by hand. Mommy made all of the clothes for Jeannie's doll. There was a secret drawer at the bottom of the case where Jeannie would keep her doll's shoes and socks. Mommy did not make these. These were store bought, and Jeannie only got these on special occasions like birthdays, Saint Patrick's Day, and Christmas. Jeannie's birthday was in November, near Thanksgiving, when outside was all white, and momma said there was "deep snow." Jeannie and I would play house, but I was not allowed to touch Jeannie's things, but Jeannie let me dress her doll when we would play together. The rest of the time, Tony was kept in her metallic case, and there was a lock on the case, and only Jeannie had the key, but it was still fun playing house with her. She told funny stories. She told stories about when we would be grown up and own our own houses, and we would be rich and never have to move ever again. Jeannie was in second grade, and she said she had already moved six times.

Eight families lived in our building at Camp Carson. Across the courtyard from ours was another building just like the one we lived in. Eight families lived in that one too. All the children would play together when there was no snow outside. In the summer we played tag a lot, but I was always “it,” and I did not like that. Everyone laughed at me. One night just before Mommy called us in, the girl next door, Grace, said, “I have to pee.” Then she did something very odd. She sat down near the wall of the building and did something to her pants, and then she stood up and said, “all done.” We kept playing until Mommy called us all in. I ran over to where Grace had been and saw that the dirt was dark like it had been rained on. I asked Jeannie about this, but she said to ask Mommy, and I did.

“Well, girls have to sit to do that,” Mommy said.” You know Princess, the dog, she does the same thing, but the boy dogs do it differently.”

“You mean girls and boys are not the same?” I asked momma.

“That’s right, honey; they are different under their clothes,” replied momma.

Profoundly I asked, “Why?”

Momma answered, “Because, that is how God made us.” That answer satisfied me for a while. Mommy took me to church a lot with her, and I always had questions for her about God, and I noticed that God did all sorts of strange things that we were not supposed to question.

Daddy worked with Sergeant Bryce. He was nice and always called me “soldier,” and I liked that. He played baseball for his Army Company. Daddy played

sometimes too, but mostly it was Sergeant Bryce who played. We would walk over to the baseball park. The games were at night, but there were bright lights on tall telephone poles dark as licorice whips that made everything as bright as morning. We had grass in our front yard, but it was mostly brown and had lots of weeds, but the baseball field had grass so green I wanted to hug it, to roll in it, to take it home and make it my blanket. The field was lined with white stripes and the infield was red like the Rocky Mountains at sunset. I had never seen any place more beautiful than a baseball field.

Sundays, we all went to church, and Mommy and Daddy and Jeannie got communion, but Brian, my brother, and I had to “sit in the pew and be good, or you’ll be sorry,” Daddy would say. I liked going to church on Sundays. The priest wore different kinds of clothes than the people in the church. He spoke a strange language that only Daddy understood. Sometimes the priest would walk down the aisle and sprinkle water on us with a silver wand and say things in that strange language. Other times, he would hold up a smoke maker and fill the church with a sweet smelling cloud that made me want to have that smell in our home, but he always spoke in a strange language except when he gave sermon, and even though he said that in English, I never understood that either.

Aunt Margie, Mommy’s sister, came to visit in the summer at Camp Carson. Everyone in the house was talking about the camping trip, even Aunt Margie. The trip began with us kids hauling things out to the car. Daddy brought a tent, and

Mommy carried a bundle of blankets. There were boxes filled with food to eat. Then Sergeant Bryce, who lived only a couple of houses away from us, drove into the parking lot, and his children got out of the car and his wife too. Everyone hugged, and there was much laughter and happiness about “going camping.” Mommy told me we were going to a place called Royal Gorge. She said it had the “highest suspension bridge in America, and we’re going across it.” She said, “we would camp for five nights in the forest, and have weenie roasts and sleep under the stars.” I did not know what she meant, but her excitement kindled a fire of desire in me that made me want to go camping too.

When we got to our campsite, high up in the mountains, Sergeant Bryce and Daddy pitched our tents. Each family had one tent to sleep in. Aunt Margie slept with us. After our tent was raised, Daddy had us scoop up pine needles to make our beds from. This was hard work because the needles stuck our fingers and palms, but once this was done, we had soft beds to sleep on instead of the hard rocky ground. All of us children must have gathered needles for hours because when we finished, it was time to eat dinner. Sergeant Bryce had made a campfire. A ring of rocks surrounded the fire. He laid a black metal grill on top of the stones and began to brew coffee. Mommy took out hot dogs and buns and placed them on the grill. I ate until my stomach could not hold another bite. We all ate like that. I ate so much that my recently “inny” belly button again became an “outie.” Daddy said, “Mountain air increases the appetite.” I was just hungry, and I would have eaten like that at home, if we had food. When the sun went down, we all gathered around the

fire, and the adults started to sing songs. Mommy sang, "Home, Home on the Range." Later she sang a song about "Old Shep" a dog that was hurt and had to be put down by its owner. All the children cried, especially when Mommy whimpered like "Old Shep" just before he died. All the grown-ups sang songs. Daddy said he was tired. Mommy said she was tired too, and they went to bed in the tent. Aunt Margie told Jeannie, Brian, and me that we could stay up with her and sing and watch for shooting stars. We saw a shooting star. It streaked across the sky leaving a trail of smoke as it disappeared into blackness. Finally, the air became chilly, and we all went to sleep in our tents.

Much later, I woke up because Daddy snored loudly. In between the rise and fall of his snores, I could hear the breathing of everyone in both tents. Everything seemed so peaceful and right. I quietly crawled out of the tent to where the fire had been, but by this time, it looked like a pit full of glowing, angry, red eyes. Each breath of wind changed the intensity of the red eyes peaking out at me from the pit. It was beautiful. I looked up into the black sky and saw it salted with speckles of light that I had been told were stars. The entire night sky seemed ablaze with the cold flames of these distant objects called stars. Except for the breathing in the tents, and Daddy's snoring, there was no sound at all.

During the next several days, we hiked the trails of the forest. We saw what Daddy called, "interesting rock formations," little waterfalls, pools of cool mountain water. Some had men fishing in them. One small waterfall sounded just like Daddy snoring. Then we drove to Pike's Peak, crossed the Royal Gorge Bridge, and visited

Indians on a reservation. Aunt Margie took us to a gift shop where they sold arrowheads, Indian pottery, and jewelry. Next-door was a museum with a sign that read, "See the petrified Indian." Brian wanted to see that very much, but Aunt Margie said she did not have money for that, so we did not go there. She took a picture of the sign and sent it to us when she returned home to Chicago.

On our last night of camping when the fire had died down, all the grown-ups told us stories, scary ghost stories. Daddy told about Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman. Aunt Margie told a story about a Leprechaun who lost his pot of gold, but then got it back. Sergeant Bryce stayed up with all us kids that night. He brought out a bag of marshmallows and showed us how to put them on a stick. He then cooked them over the fire. He preferred his just slightly browned, but I quickly learned that they could catch on fire if left over the embers too long. These blackened marshmallows tasted better to me than the tanned ones, and from that time on, I burned all my marshmallows.

After the camping trip ended, Aunt Margie went back to Chicago. Mommy seemed to be sad, and at night, I could hear her and Daddy talking in their loud voices. Sometimes I would fall asleep while the loud voices continued. Mommy started to go to Mass more often, and she would take Brian and me along with her. Sometimes she would leave Brian with a neighbor, but always she took me along with her.

## 2

Mommy hung up the phone and said to me in an excited voice, "Get dressed. We're going to Mass. Today's First Friday." I had gone to Mass a lot, but I always wondered how there could be so many First Fridays, but I never asked about this. Mommy's excited mood told me this was something special, so I hurried and got dressed.

The Chapel was not far from our house at Camp Carson, Colorado. It was at the end of a long concrete sidewalk that from our house went down hill. The sidewalk was recently poured. On our way to church, there were two men watering freshly seeded grass on a field that the last time I had come this way was just dirt, but today, there were little sprouts of green poking through the brown soil. The men had big hoses, like fire hoses, and they used them to spray the field. Mommy said "hi" to the men, and one said "see you in a while." We kept walking.

The chapel was painted white on the outside and had a pointy tower on one side. Inside, it smelled of burned beeswax candles and incense. Mommy said that it was a smell God liked. I did not tell her I liked the smell too. I liked First Fridays more than Sunday Masses, because the priest did not give a sermon. I never understood the sermon or anything the priest talked about, but Mommy seemed to like sermons. Once, I recall while the priest talked, asking Mommy what all the lit candles meant. She said that they were for God. I asked her if God was in the church. "Yes, he is," she whispered. I stood up on my pew and surveyed the entire

church while the priest spoke and said, "Mommy, I don't see God here," in a voice that I believe was heard as far away as Denver. Mommy scooped me up into her arms and hugged me, and asked me to do her a favor." Please be quiet until Mass is over." She put her finger to her lips and I nodded yes.

When we left the church, Mommy took out her make-up and "touched up her face a bit" before we started back to our home. Usually, we went to the café on First Fridays where I would get an egg sandwich even though I wanted a BLT. "We are Catholics, and we do not eat meat on Fridays," I was told; yet another rule of God's that I did not understand. I liked my egg sandwiches smeared with red ketchup.

"I think we should just go home today and have lunch there. Would that be okay with you," Mommy asked. I nodded yes, and grabbed her hand and began pulling her up the steep hill. I remembered that an hour earlier we had easily walked down this same concrete sidewalk toward the church. On the way, we stopped and talked to the gardeners who were watering the baby grass. They were young men who said they were soldiers on a work detail. One wore a white tee shirt and the other was bare-chested. He had a lot of muscles, and Mom chatted with him. The other gardener asked me if I would like to use the hose. He said he would show me how to adjust the flow of water out of the nozzle. We went up the hill to a tree that spread its branches out over the sidewalk, and from there, we watered the field of sprouting grass. He told me, "If you keep the ground wet and don't let it dry out, the sprouts will appear in a day or two. But if you let it dry out, it could take weeks, if ever."



I noticed that nothing grew under the large, old tree where we stood as protection against the midday sun. “Why doesn’t anything grow here,” I asked truly perplexed.

“That’s ‘cause anything trying to grow under a tree like this one don’t get enough sunlight. The big tree’s shade blocks the sunlight out for everything else. See, there’s not even a little tree growing under any of these trees. If you look around you will notice all the trees are the same. That pine over there, see it has nothing growing under it.” I looked and he was right. Nothing grew there either. Then I saw my mom and the other gardener come out from behind the pine. Mom straightened her hair and pulled at her dress. She looked up and saw me. “Did you have fun watering the grass,” she asked?

“I did. I learned a lot about how the seeds grow and need to be watered all the time,” I said excitedly having learned this from the gardener.

“That’s good. I’m glad you learned something fun and new today. Say good bye to the nice gardeners,” she said, and we left. When we got home, Mommy asked me what I would like to have for lunch.

“Can I have a BLT?” I asked.

“Sure” she said, as she put her finger to her lips.

\* \* \* \*

The train station was full of people, but mostly I saw soldiers in their green dress uniforms. They had gaily painted golden stripes on their sleeves, and many of them carried a large duffle bag into which Daddy told me they placed all the things

they would need until they could get resupplied. Daddy had one of these bags too. I remember him packing it that morning.

“Here’s the duffle bag lock, Gene,” Mommy told him.

“Give it to me, Mayme.”

“Oh and, Jim Bryce is here.”

Today, Mommy dressed up really nicely--of course, we had just gone to Sunday Mass. Mr. Bryce came into the house at Camp Carson, Colorado. He was not in his Army uniform, but instead wore black slacks and a white shirt with a coat and a tie. “What can I do for you, Gene,” he asked.

“Nothing now, Jim” he said. “Mayme found the lock, and I’ve got everything I’ll need till I get to Korea.”

“Let me carry it out to the car for you while you say goodbye to the kids,” said Jim Bryce.

“Well Jim, I’m bringing them with me.”

“To Korea?”

“No, to the train station, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure, no problem. Here let me get your duffle bag.” And with that Sergeant Bryce lifted Daddy’s duffle bag to his shoulder and took it out to his car.

“Now the movers will be here in a couple of days. They will do all the packing and moving of furniture. Will you be all right Mayme?” Daddy asked.

“Sure, I’ll be fine; why wouldn’t I?” she said, but to me her voice had the sound of pain, and on her face she wore the angry look like when Daddy would yell at her. Her face looked all twisted like a spider web. It was a look that scared me.

“Get in the car kids,” yelled Daddy, and like magic, my brother and sister seemed to emerge from thin air and march out the door. “Sergeant Bryce is going to take us to the train station.”

I had no awareness that a thing called memory connected all events in life. All the things I knew about my life until that moment were unconnected events that seemed like randomly shuffled photographs. For the first time, I realized that my life was one continuous event and not a scattered collection of black and white photos. As we walked to the car, I suddenly realized that Daddy was what Jeannie called “the danger.” Until that moment, most of what I remembered about my life was running from the thing Jeannie called “the danger.” I suddenly recalled my sister, brother, and me running away from or hiding from “the danger.” I could see the soles of Jeannie’s shoes in front of me as he chased us with his belt, and I recalled pain on my arms and backside when he was around. It seemed that no matter where we hid, “the danger” found us. We hid in the dollhouse, the garage, behind the lilac bush in the back yard, but he always found us. On this day at this moment, I realized that those black-and-white images stored in my mind were all connected.

We all got into Sergeant Bryce's blue car and drove to the Denver train station.

The train station was crowded. People stood close together. Some of them were hugging, but I could see some were crying, mostly women. Daddy marched to the coach he would ride and handed the porter his bag. "I'll see that it gits into yo' compartment, sah," said the man who took Daddy's bag. He had a bright and warm smile. Daddy only nodded and then came back to the four of us. Daddy and Mommy hugged too and said some things I could not hear either because they were said too softly or maybe because of the noise inside the terminal. Someone yelled, "All Aboar-redd!" and then Mommy began to cry. Her eye make up ran creating sooty streams that ran down on her cheeks in jagged channels. She got lipstick on Daddy's cheek.

\* \* \* \*

This was not the first time I had seen Mommy's face look like this. That summer, we were supposed to go to Mass, but when I got up I saw Mommy in the kitchen in her short-sleeved PJs. She was very quiet. She moved slowly, like an old person moves, like grandma moved. Her back was to me. She turned when I said "good morning, Mommy" and waited for my kiss. Maybe she saw shock in my eyes as they perused her face and her arms strangely colored purple and pink. "What is that on your face?" I asked.

"What do you mean, honey?" she said.

“Mommy, you look like you have pinch marks all over you. What is that?”

Spilling from her eyes were the same rivers of sootiness that I now witnessed pouring out of her eyes at the train station.

“Oh, that’s nothing. Don’t you worry about it. Mommy will be better in a few days.” And like a miracle in a few days the pinch marks went away. I worried a long time about getting these strange red and purple and pink marks on my body, but I never did. It would be a long time before I asked my mom about these marks again, but when I did, she said she did not know what I was talking about.

\* \* \* \*

While we waited for the train to leave, I saw a billboard advertising beer, but it had a picture of a baseball park and happy fans drinking. As I stared at the picture, I remembered one night at Camp Carson, when we went to a baseball game. We walked over to the field with the Bryces. The lights had just come on for this evening’s game. The bleachers were full of cheering people who would cheer the loudest when the Army team took the field. We sat a few rows behind the home plate, but before the game began, policemen came and asked my parents to come with them. Mrs. Bryce told Mommy she would take us home. I must have fallen asleep during the game, because when I woke up, it was the next morning. I was in my bed at home. Mommy was home, but Daddy was not. “He had to work” is all that Momma said.

“Who were those men,” I pleaded, “and why did they take Daddy away?”

“They didn’t take Daddy away; they just wanted to talk to us. Everything is all right now; don’t you worry about anything,” so I didn’t.

Someone announced, “All aboar-redd!” Now, my brother and sister were crowding in on Daddy and pulling at his coat for attention and stretching out their arms. They were crying too. I stood behind a concrete column and peaked out. I did not know why I was crying.

“Last Call—All Aboar-redd.”

The man who took Daddy’s bag was now hanging from the train car by one hand and waving to the conductor with his other. Daddy said something to his clinging family, and like people stung by an electric shock, they let go and jumped back. He turned toward the train and without looking back, went to the train car where the man was waving his hand, and jumped on board. Daddy’s car began to move, pulled forward by the might of two black, smoky engines that in the distance began to make a chook, chook, chook sound. So slowly did the train move that at first, it seemed only the people inside the cars were moving, but when the first set of windows passed me, it became apparent that the entire train was going away. I saw the back of Daddy’s coat, and I began to chase after it. I ran for some thirty feet, but the next car and the next car passed me, and then I knew “the danger” was gone.

### 3

The next morning, early, movers in tan uniforms came to our house. In a few hours they had packed everything we owned into boxes and cardboard barrels. Out in front of our house was a long yellow truck with a big green sailboat painted on the side. My sister called it the “Mayflower.” Then began a slow process of moving

beds, chairs, tables, and everything else we possessed in the world from inside our house to the interior of the truck. Back and forth the men marched sometimes in pairs when they moved heavy things, but often one-by-one as they lifted chairs or boxes over their heads. They reminded me of ants as they marched about doing their business. They finished before we had lunch. They handed Mommy some papers and told her they would see her in a week in Ottawa, Illinois.

“Will Sergeant Bryce take us to the train?” I asked.

“Not this time. We have depended on him too much lately. I have tickets for the bus. Tomorrow, we will take a taxi to the Greyhound station in Colorado Springs, and from there we will take the bus to the train station in Denver.” This sounded like fun, and I ran off to tell my brother and sister about the adventure ahead.

It was dark as we prepared to leave Camp Carson the next morning. Streetlights were still on. Out front, a taxi waited where yesterday there had been the long, yellow moving van. The driver helped carry our suitcases that Mommy had packed after we came home from seeing Daddy off. They were too large and too heavy for either Brian or me to carry. Jeannie managed to lug one down the stairs and almost got it to the cab before the driver snatched it from her saying, “Here, let me handle that for you Miss. Wouldn’t want to muss up your pretty dress now would we.” I had never heard anyone call my sister Miss before, and I wondered what it meant. It sounded important the way he said it. He tossed the suitcase on top of the others and slammed the trunk shut with a finality that signaled the end of

our days at Camp Carson. Mommy pulled the front door closed and walked down the sidewalk and got into the taxi. She sat in the front seat with the driver, and us three kids were in the back. Mommy offered him one of her cigarettes, and he accepted. We arrived at the sentry gate of the camp where two soldiers chatting with each other were on guard duty. We passed by them unnoticed. A few minutes later we arrived at the bus terminal, and an hour later at Denver's train depot.

We were in the station when our train arrived. It made so much noise as it slowed that it made my eyes cry. Steam poured out from around its silvery wheels as it slid to a stop. Doors opened and people began to descend from the passenger cars. "Mommy is that what we are going to do?" I asked. She nodded, and then the same voice I had heard when my dad left said "All Aboar-redd!" A porter in a black uniform greeted us and helped us up a small ladder into the train. We sat on two couches that faced each other. An Army man who looked like the man Daddy gave his bags to the day before entered our car and asked Mommy if it "would be all right if he sat here?"

"Glad to have company," Mommy said, and the man sat on a couch across the aisle from us. He and Mommy talked. I heard the word "Korea." "Yes, ma'am, I be juss back from o'er there." The sun was rising as the train chugged out of the Denver station heading east. I slept for a long time, but I remember the man brought us soda pop in glass bottles. Mommy said he was very kind, and she did not have much money.

The train traveled a long, long, long time.



“Kansas City. Next stop. Kansas City,” the conductor shouted. By this time it was dark again, dark like when we left for the bus station in Colorado Springs. The Army man told Mommy, “Well, I’ll be seeing you. I got to move to another car.”

“Why is that?”

“We crossin’ the Mason-Dixon Line in Missouri, ma’am, and it ain’t safe to be ridin’ with the white folk once you cross the Mason-Dixon,” he said.

“Well, to hell with that,” said Mommy. “You just stay put. You can ride with us.”

The Army man flashed a brilliant smile. “You’re very kind ma’am, but it wouldn’t be safe fo’ you neither if I stayed here.” He stood up, put on his Army hat, and got off the train, but before he left, he turned and smiled at us, and said, “Enjoyed our chat, ma’am,” and then disappeared into the darkness of the Kansas City evening air.

Shortly after the Army man left a conductor came by. Mommy asked him why the Army man had to leave the train. “In the South, they ride in the back cars.” Mommy was furious, but said nothing. I fell asleep before the train left the station. When I woke our car was full of bright daylight, and the train was chugging into the Ottawa Station where Grandpa was waiting to take us to his house.

## 4

Grandpa had a funny nose. It was big and hooked like an eagle's beak. His car had a plastic head of an Indian on the hood. The Indian had a nose that reminded Brian and me of Grandpa's. He said his car was a Pontiac. It was brown and tan. It was much nicer than Sergeant Bryce's car. There were four doors and he had music in his car.

"Gene's last letter said he would be in Korea for eighteen months. How are you and the kids going to manage while he is away?" grandpa asked.

"I'm going to find a job, Dad. I can get work cleaning houses, ironing clothes, whatever it takes to keep a roof over our heads." I have our name in for one of the War Homes out by the old coalmine. It might be a while before we can move into the War Homes, but in the meantime if we can stay with you for a few days, that will give me time to find a temporary place."

"Sure, Helen and I would be glad to have you four kids for a while. I can't believe Gene had to go to another war. I thought France and Germany would have been enough. Now we have the Communists trying to take over the world. All we want to do is live in peace in America." Grandpa was very upset when he said this. He trembled with anger.

Momma found us an apartment a few days later, and before long, our furniture came. Not long after that we were moving again. The city's housing department had a recent vacancy in one of the War Homes. Our house was not far

from an abandoned open pit coalmine. On our street, there must have been a couple dozen such homes. Some were duplexes, but ours was a single-family home. We lived in the last house on the street just before the dogleg in the road. After the dogleg there was just open field. Momma and Jeannie shared a room so did Brian and I. Our room was very large and we had plenty of space for our toys. Out back of our house there was a wooded area and a sidewalk that led down to a pond. Momma said the pond was created after the coal mine closed and stopped pumping water out of the pit. We would sometimes go there to watch kids fish, but Momma did not like us to go far from the house.

We had not lived in the War Homes long when a stray dog followed Brian home. She had black eyes and snowy white fur. Mommy said, "Her eyes looked like two holes burned in a blanket." After a few days, the dog, by now named Tango because she followed every move we made, seemed to have found a home, and she stayed with us. When we would return home from playing with our friends, she would lick our faces and play with us.

In August 1952, momma took me to the doctors. He examined my body and asked me a lot of questions: "Any aches? Does this hurt? How does your heart feel?" Then he told Mommy that I would need four immunizations, and he left the room for a few minutes.

"Mommy, what is an immunization," I asked?

“Oh, it’s a shot they give you to make sure you will not catch a bad disease,” she said.

I asked, “Is it like a shot from a gun?”

“No, nothing like that. It just pricks for a second, and then it is all over,” Momma said.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Just a little, but it does not last long, and you are such a brave and strong boy, you won’t mind,” my mother calmly replied, but I sensed from her voice and her words that there was more. There was something unsaid, something sinister and frightening. Then the doctor came back into the room and sat down on his little stool.

“Now, Timmy we are going to give you some shots so that you can start kindergarten. Won’t that be nice? Kindergarten is a place where you will play with other children and learn all sorts of new and interesting things. It really is a lot of fun.” Then he picked up the phone and said to his nurse, “Please bring in the PPDT.”

A woman dressed in white wearing a strange white hat came into the examining room carrying a small tray full of shot-pins. The shot-pins had long, thin, silvery needles at the end. The doctor asked me to take off my shirt. Then he swabbed my arm with a smelly white bandage. Next, he picked up one of the shot-pins and began to turn me so he could stick me with the long needle.

“Mommy no!” I yelled with a blood-curdling scream at the top of my lungs. I jerked my arm away from the clutches of the doctor. “Mommy, I will be good. Don’t

let him do this to me. Mommy, Mommy, Mommy Noooooooooo!" The doctor was very strong and experienced with this kind of behavior, because he grabbed me by the shoulder very hard and put me over his knee, pulled down my trousers, swabbed my bottom, and injected me not once, not twice, but four times. Each time, I let out a banshee like squeal in between pleading for motherly intercession and promising to be a good boy. "All done," announced the doctor as he released me from his python like grip. I leaped up and pulled up my pants and for the first time ever yelled at my mother, "I want to go home!"

The bus ride home was painful. I could not sit down, as the pain from the shots was so severe. I was still in tears when we reached our stop and got off the bus. "Why did you let him do that to me Mommy?" I asked, feeling betrayed.

"You need to have your shots in order to go to kindergarten," Momma answered. That day was the first time I had ever heard the word kindergarten.

"Why?"

"Because you need to start getting ready to go to first grade, and kindergarten gets you ready for that," she replied. The next day, Mommy and I walked over to the kindergarten. It was very close to our house. We could see the building from our front door. Mommy enrolled me, and I met my teacher, Miss Wellman.

Miss Wellman was nice and younger than Mommy. She never yelled at any of us. The first day of school, after lunch we took a nap, but I did not have blanket like the other kids, so I told Miss Wellman, "I don't take naps. I'm a big boy."

“Yes, you are a big boy. You are four years old, and soon you will be five years old, but in kindergarten, everyone takes a nap in the early afternoon after lunch,” she calmly replied. Then she added, “Today you can just sleep on the floor. I will write your mother a note to send you with a blanket tomorrow.”

It took several days and several notes to Mommy before I showed up at Miss Wellman’s with my blanket. Finally, I delivered the letter, but mostly because Miss Wellman put the note in an envelope and then pinned the envelope to my shirt. When I got home, Mommy asked, “What is that pinned to your shirt?”

“Something from Miss Wellman,” I responded. By this time, we were in the second week of school, and Mommy was not happy that I had not told her about the blanket. Soon, I was sleeping quietly on a blanket after lunch like all the other children in the class.

When I would come home from school, Tango would always be waiting for me at the door. She would jump on her back legs and greet me with her wet pink tongue. Then we would go out and play in the neighborhood. One day, I came home and Tango did not greet me. “Mommy, where is Tango?”

“Honey, I don’t know. Brian let her out this morning, and she has not come back.” The next day I did not have to go to Miss Wellman’s. It was Saturday. Brian and I took our red wagon and headed off in search of our dog. Some of the neighborhood kids joined the adventure. We wandered down to the main street where the busses let us off when Mommy took us downtown, because one of the neighborhood men said he had seen a white dog playing down by the big road. We

turned onto the sidewalk on the street and soon we saw our dog. She was asleep on the side of the road. We ran over to her, but she did not get up and greet us and lick our faces with her pink tongue. Instead, she just lay there with her tongue hanging out of her mouth like a long piece of bubble gum.

Brian and I picked Tango up and put her in the wagon, and we quickly headed for home. “Momma can fix her,” I said. As soon we were home, Brian ran into the house slamming the rusty screen door behind him, “Momma, we found Tango, but she needs your help.”

“What’s the matter with her?” Momma hollered from in the back part of the house.

“She won’t get up. She’s asleep,” I could hear Brian say.

Momma came out onto the front steps with Brian hugging her hips. She wore a blue bandana on her head as she had been cleaning the house. She stopped when she got to the bottom of the steps leading to the entry of the house. “Oh, boys,” she said softly and coolly, “I don’t think I can help Tango.”

I shouted, “Why not Momma? Tango needs you to fix her.”

Then Mommy said something hard to understand. “Tango is dead. We will need to call someone to come and take her away.”

Pleading, I asked, “Why can’t you fix her Mommy? Can’t you just do something to help her and make her better?” By now Brian was sobbing and tears were soaking his chubby red cheeks. I started to cry too. Mommy knelt down and spread her arms open and gave Brian and me a hard hug. “She is dead, boys. I am

sorry about that, but she is dead, and I cannot change that. Now, take the wagon to the side of the house and come inside and let me wash you.”

Brian went to bed after Mommy washed him, and he cried himself to sleep. I wandered the house trying to help Mommy, but mostly I just got in her way. Finally, it was lunchtime.” I’m making you some Campbell’s Beef Vegetable Soup for lunch, Timmy. Would you like crackers or a PBJ to go with it?”

“PBJ.”

“Would you like to set the table for lunch,” Momma asked. For the next few minutes, I busied myself putting bowls, napkins, spoons, and plates for the PBJs on the table. We had a red and white-checkered plastic tablecloth that I thought was very pretty. When I finished, I sat down and waited for Mommy. She brought over the PBJ and cut it after she had put it on the plate. Then she brought over the pot of soup and filled my bowl and went back into the kitchen.

As she left, I asked, “Aren’t you going to eat too, Mommy.”

“In a little bit, but you go ahead and eat,” she answered. I said Grace, and then began to eat my PBJ. A spoonful of soup and a bite of PBJ was a wonderful taste to my four-year-old tongue. “Momma, why did Tango die?” I asked.

“Honey, she was probably hit by a car and died from that,” Momma answered.

“No, I mean why did she die?” There was a long pause as if something important had been asked, and it required a moment of thought before a response could be given.



“Timmy, everything dies,” Momma answered.

“Everything?”

“Yes, everything.” There was a long pause. I scooped up several soup spoons of my vegetable soup, and then I asked, “Mommy, will you die?”

“Yes, honey, I will die one day,” answered Mommy as if that were the end of the conversation. I bit hard and deep into my Wonder Bread Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwich. I gulped down more of my Campbell’s Beef Vegetable Soup as an antidote to her words. Then I asked, “Mommy, will I die?”

There was a long pause, and by this time, Momma had left her work in the kitchen and was standing by me. She knelt down and took my head in between her wet hands and kissed me on the forehead and said, “Yes, Timmy, you will die.”

“No, I won’t,” I yelled at her. “I will eat my vegetable soup and Wonder Bread. That will make me strong, and I will never die!” Mommy did not answer me, and I did not talk to her about this any more.

The next week kindergarten ended. We had a big ceremony and Miss Wellman gave all of us a certificate stating that we were now first graders. Mommy was there and so were Grandma and Brian. After the ceremony, we walked down to the main street and Grandma bought us all ice cream cones.

All summer long, I played with my friends, especially Jeff. He had a jack-knife and had cut open a garter snake and inside of her there were little eggs that he said would become snakes if he had not killed the snake first. I felt badly for the babies

in the eggs, but Jeff was my friend, and he let me cut things with his knife. One night we took out his trash, and when he opened the garbage can there were little white worms inside of it; he called them maggots, and they were swimming all over old corn cobs. I asked him what they were, and he said they were baby flies. He said they would go into the ground and in a couple of days they would come out of the ground and become big black houseflies. Everyday that summer seemed to bring a new adventure and new knowledge.

One night in August, Mommy, Jeannie, and I were at the Crowleys because Mommy was babysitting so that Chet and Dorothy Crowley could have a night out on the town. It was dark when suddenly we heard the sirens of fire trucks and police cars. We went to the front door and saw these vehicles whiz by the Crowley's house. Mommy walked out to the road to see what was happening when she shouted, "Our house is on fire. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, where is Brian?" Mommy told Jeannie and me to stay at the Crowleys, and she ran toward our house a hundred yards away. From where we were we could only see the flashing red lights of the fire trucks.

The Crowley's came home soon after Mommy left, and Jeannie and I ran to our house. The house seemed to be okay, and I saw Brian standing in the front yard with Mommy and a fireman. There was a man from the newspaper there, and he was asking Mommy questions. I heard her say, "For all I care, you can say I fell asleep with a cigarette in my hand, and that's how it started."

"Ma'am, are you sure that is what you want us to report?" asked the reporter.

Mommy answered, "See if I care what you say." She left the reporter and went into the house. Jeannie and I followed. The firemen were wrapping up their hoses and preparing to leave as Jeannie and I went into the house. The lower part of the wall in the living room was charred. Later, Mommy told Jeannie, that Brian was playing with matches with a friend of his, and Jeannie's paper train set caught on fire scorching the wall. Brian had run next door to the neighbors who called the fire department. The neighbor put the fire out with a rug, but the firemen doused the wall anyway to make sure the fire was really out.

Grandpa called the next day and asked Mommy if she really fell asleep with a cigarette in her hand, because that was what the newspaper reported. Mommy told Grandpa the truth, and he asked her if she wanted him to come over and "give Brian a good walloping." Mommy said she would take care of Brian later, but she needed to think about this before she did anything. From that day on, Mommy never left Brian alone.

Not many days after the fire, there was a frantic knock on our front door. Our next-door neighbor came over and told Mommy that the car parked in front of our house had bees in it, and would she do something about it. Mommy went outside and looked at the car. It had been parked in our yard since we moved in. Mommy said it was Daddy's car that the Army shipped from Colorado. The inside of the car was full of angry bees. Mommy got all dressed up in her winter coat and put on a babushka and gloves and blue jeans. Then she went out and opened the car. "I hope

the bees will just fly away if I let them out," she said, but the bees seemed not to notice the doors of the car were opened. The next day, Mommy took a broom and the hose and went out to the car and sprayed the bees with water and swatted them with the broom like it was some kind of giant fly swatter, but this only made the bees mad, and they chased Mommy into the house screaming as she ran.

After the bees calmed down, Mommy left to go to the store. She came back with a can of DDT. When we were all asleep, Mommy went out to the car and opened the trunk and began to spray every inch of the car with DDT. The next morning, Mommy said that all the bees were dead. She asked us to look for any signs of life in the car. We went out to look, and all around the car were dead bees. Some were squashed by Momma's broom, but most were just lying there on the ground or in the car. Their tongues were sticking out of their heads. It seemed like they were all looking at us through their angry, beady, shiny, black eyes. Mommy said she had to kill the queen or we would soon have more bees. The inside of the car was silent. Not a single living bee was to be seen. Mommy came out of the house with a dustpan and began to scoop out the hive that oozed with sticky honey and soft bee's wax. Mommy took the bee comb out into the woods behind our house. Mommy wrote a letter to Daddy in Korea and asked him what she should do with the car.

Not long after Mommy got rid of the bees and the car, I started first grade at Saint Columba's Catholic School. I did not have to get more shots. Sister Jeremy was my teacher. She wore a black suit with a veil over her head. She told us to call her

“Sister,” and we all did. After a couple of weeks in school we learned the “Our Father.” I really liked that prayer. I liked it so much that after school was over one day, I went over to Miss Wellman’s kindergarten class and asked her if I could talk to the children there. She said it would be all right, and then I told them about the prayer called the “Our Father.” I told the class I would teach them this prayer. Miss Wellman interrupted me with, “You know, Timmy, we are at the end of the class for today. Maybe you could come back some other day.” Since the kindergarten was just across the field from my house, Miss Wellman told me she would walk me to the house. I beamed with pride and felt very much honored by the fact that she would do this for me.

“Can I speak with your mother?” Miss Wellman asked as we approached the steps of the house. I bounded up the steps and into the house shouting, “Mommy, Mommy, Miss Wellman is here and wants to talk to you.” I was behind my mother when she got to the screen door. Miss Wellman said something to my mother, but I did not hear what she said. As my mother headed down the stairs, she said, “Timmy, why don't you wait in the house, so I can talk to Miss Wellman.” I went back inside and made a PBJ and poured a glass of milk waiting anxiously to be called outside. After a few minutes, Mommy came back into the house.

When I noticed that Mommy was alone, I asked, “Where is Miss Wellman?”

“Oh, she had to get back to the school room to close up.” There was a pause in Mommy’s voice, and then she began, “Timmy, you know you’re in First Grade now. First graders are not supposed to go to kindergarten anymore.”

“But what did Miss Wellman want to tell you?” I asked excitedly. “Did she tell you I was going to teach the children the ‘Our Father?’”

“Yes, she did, and she said it was very sweet of you. But I want you to come home from school instead of going to the kindergarten from now on.” Mommy made me promise to come home. I wondered who would teach the children to pray, but I was good to my word and never went back to see Miss Wellman again.

Just before Halloween, the weather began to change. Fewer children played outside during lunchtime at Saint Columba’s. My friend, Tommy, and I wore coats and hats because it was cold outside. We were playing hide and seek with others in our class, and he said we should hide in the hall on the second floor of the school. We ran up the steps and waited for someone come and find us. To win, the person who was “it” had to call out the name of the person he saw in order to win the game. I told Tommy we should change coats and hats so the person calling out our names would get it wrong, and we would not be out of the game, and with that I began to unbuckle the two straps that held my jacket closed. Tommy said, “I’m not changing coats with you. Yours is all raggedy and dirty.” It was then that I noticed how clean and new his coat was, but I had not noticed this before he had said those words to me. His words hurt me, because they made me wonder why I wore a coat that was all dirty and raggedy when I had a good coat at home that was clean and new. I had never noticed how shabby my coat was until Tommy said it was raggedy and dirty.

Jeannie always walked me home because Mommy could not afford to pay for the school bus. The last hundred yards before our house, right where the Crowleys lived, I ran home as hard as I could. Jeannie was behind me yelling for me to wait, but I needed an answer about the coat.

I yanked open the front door and ran to my room. I pulled my new coat off a coat hanger and ran into the living room and asked Mommy, "Why do I have to wear this 'raggedy and dirty' old coat to school when I have a nice one in my closet?" She told me that the nice coat was the coat I wore to church on Sundays." "Do you want God to see you in that old coat or in your nice new coat," she asked.

"Can't I wear this coat if I promise to keep it clean?"

"No, something will happen, and you will get this dirty too, and then you won't have any nice coat. Mommy does not have the money for a new coat for you," she said as she put her cigarette out in the ashtray. I continued to wear the raggedy and dirty coat to school.

Soon, it was Thanksgiving, and we ate dinner with Grandma and Grandpa. I wore my Sunday coat to their house. I asked Mommy, "If we are not going to Mass, why am I wearing my Sunday coat?" Grandma must have heard this conversation, because the next day, Grandma came over to our house. Mommy told me to get dressed up and to wear my old coat. We got into Grandma's car and drove to downtown Ottawa where there was a large department store. Grandma took me over to the coats and asked me which color I liked. I picked out a maroon coat that looked just like my dirty raggedy coat, but it was new and clean and maroon. She

told me to try it on. It was a perfect fit. Grandma and Mommy spent a long time in the store buying other things. Mommy got a pair of nylons. Grandma said Mommy would soon need these for a special occasion.

The next day at school, I showed Tommy my new coat. He said he liked my jacket, but he still did not want to trade.

Santa came to town. Mommy took me to see him. In front of City Hall, I could see his sleigh, but there were no reindeer. Mommy said they were having lunch. Then way up on top of City Hall, there was a poof of smoke, and Santa Claus stepped out from the smoke. Everyone cheered. He threw candy to the crowd below. Mommy said it was salt-water taffy, but when I bit into a piece, it was sweet and not salty. Then, Santa came down and talked to everyone in the crowd. It was getting late, and Mommy said it was time to go home. I was glad to leave, because, I wanted to get home to tell Jeannie and Brian that I had seen Santa Claus. We took the bus that would stop by our street. It was the first time I had taken a bus that was not the school bus. I asked, "Mommy, why do all these people have grey hair and not brown hair like you?" I noticed everyone was looking at us. "Why Mommy?"

"Shhhhhhs. I will tell you when we get home."

When we got home, Mommy never answered my question, but she told me, "Tomorrow, your Daddy is coming home for the war in Korea." It had been eighteen months since I had seen Daddy. What I remembered was more a presence and less a person. The presence always brought feelings of dread and anxiety to me. Jeannie



seemed happy, but neither Brian nor I said much. When we went to bed, Mommy said, "Remember, your Daddy will be home tomorrow when you wake up. He will be very tired, so please don't make any noise that wakes him up."

We did not have school the next day. I slept in like Mommy said I should. Brian was up, and I could hear him pattering around the house. Then he came back into our bedroom and said, "Daddy's home, and he brought us each a toy." I leaped out of bed and ran to the living room where I saw two plastic, Army-green, toy jeeps. "Are these ours?" I asked. Brian answered, "Yes, who else would he get them for?" I wanted to play with the jeep, but I was afraid that Daddy would get mad if I did. Brian was already playing with one of the toys. It must be all right, I hoped. Then Brian did something that scared me. He went down the hall and peaked in Mommy's room. He came back and whispered, "Daddy's in bed with Mommy, and they are both asleep. I heard Grandma and Grandpa here last night. Jeannie's with them." We continued to play with the jeeps, but within a few minutes, Brian had reduced his to a pile of rubble as the wheels fell off and some of the plastic broke. I tried to be very careful with mine, but within minutes, my jeep too was reduced to a heap of broken green plastic. We got dressed and went out to play. A little while later, Mommy called us in for breakfast. Daddy was there, and we gave him hugs and kisses. Then he said, "I see you've had fun with the jeeps, how about some French toast for breakfast?" We squealed with delight even though we had never had French toast before and did not know what it was. We were relieved that Daddy did not get mad that we broke the toys he bought us.

The next Monday, just before school was over, Sister Jeremy told me to wait after class. She said she had a surprise for me. When school ended, she asked me to go out to the playground and come back in a few minutes. No one was on the playground as it was cold outside, so I went back inside and sat on the stairs where I waited for a very long time. When no one came to get me, I got up and quietly walked up the stairs towards my classroom. Sister Jeremy was talking to someone. He was wearing an Army uniform. The discussion seemed very serious. Then Sister Jeremy saw me and waved to me to come into the room." Timmy, I have been talking to your Daddy about your progress in the class so far this year. He will have more to say to you about that at home." The man in the Army uniform was Daddy! When he turned around and looked at me, he looked like he was mad about something.

During the next week, Daddy taught me the alphabet, and he showed me the difference between the letters d and b and p and q. He said I would need to learn more about arithmetic too. He showed me how to tie my shoes. The following Friday, he again came to school wearing his Army uniform to get me. We went to the office after school, and Daddy got my school records and Jeannie's too. He told the clerk in the office, "I have orders to the ROTC unit at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan." Then Daddy, Jeannie and I got on the bus and went home. When we got home there was a big truck in front of our house, and many men loading furniture, boxes and barrels onto this truck. Mommy was talking to them as we arrived.

Inside our home all the curtains were gone. I went to my bedroom and everything was gone. Brian came into the room and said, "We're moving."

"Where are we going to live?" I asked. Brian said, "We are going to Grandma and Grandpa's to live while Daddy goes to go Michigan and gets us a house. Then we are going to move to Michigan."

There was a big Christmas party at Grandma and Grandpa's. Many of my uncles and aunts were there. The house must have had thirty people in it for the celebration. All the grownups told us kids "to be good because Santa was coming to visit." We all ate in Grandma's dinning room. After dessert, there was a loud noise in the living room, and everyone got up to see what it was, and there was Santa by the tree placing presents for everyone! Jeannie got a sewing kit full of doll clothes; I got a carpenter's kit with a saw and a hammer. Brian got a toy truck and cowboy boots. Santa let me sit on his lap, and he told me I was a good boy, and that made me happy to know. I looked for Daddy everywhere, but he did not come. Mommy said he was getting our house ready in Michigan.

# 5

Daddy drove us home from the train station in Lansing, Michigan, in the DeSoto he had purchased. It was the day after New Year. There was snow everywhere, and it was cold. Mommy let me wear the jacket that grandma bought me. When we were in the car, Daddy asked Mommy, "Why did you buy a jacket that color, Mayme?" His voice had those jagged shards of disapproval, and I was worried that he would take my jacket away from me. "Your mom picked out the jacket for Timmy, hon," Mommy answered. Then she added, "I didn't have any money, so I didn't think I could impose my taste on her purse." Daddy got real quiet after that. I wondered if he knew Mommy lied to him. He had a cigarette in his mouth, but he took it out and put it in the ashtray. Jeannie and Brian sat quietly in the back with me. I sat by the window behind Daddy and looked out at the streets and buildings and the snow.

We pulled into a tiny parking lot at the end of two rows of buildings that Daddy called "the barracks." We would live in the end unit farthest from the parking lot. Daddy said it was, "905-D Maple Lane." He and Mommy walked ahead of us on the sidewalk that separated the two barracks. Each of the barracks had four units with a different family in each one. Our unit was a lot like the War Homes that we had lived in, except instead of being at the end of the street, we were in the middle of a very large neighborhood with hundreds of houses just like ours.

Daddy opened the door to the house, and Mommy went in. We entered the house through the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen was a living room, and in it, there was a large furnace that heated the house. The furnace was next to the wall and had a big silvery pipe that took the exhaust up the smoke stack to the outside air. There were two bedrooms and a bathroom that had a shower stall like the War Homes had.

Daddy took Mommy back to the living room and then showed her the utility room. There was a telephone in it and a pantry where Daddy had already stacked cans of peas and corn. Mommy seemed to like this room, because she stared at it and looked it over for a long time. There was a single light that hung from a long wire in the utility room.

All of the rooms in the house had boxes in them. Daddy said that he had had the movers put the boxes in the rooms that they belonged to. Daddy had set up bunk beds in one of the bedrooms and there was also a bed there. Our furniture from Ottawa had been set up already. Mommy said that she would get to work on making curtains as soon as she had her sewing machine working. Daddy had put the sewing machine in the utility room.

The next day Daddy drove us to Sunday Mass at Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in downtown East Lansing. This church was much smaller than Saint Columba, and it was made of wood. It was very dark inside and quite cold. All the people wore heavy coats, and some had on boots to keep their feet dry from the snow. After mass, Daddy took us to meet the priest. His name was Father Mack. I

had gone to Mass a lot with Mommy and even with Grandma, but I had never met a priest. Father Mack had a big smile and talked kindly to all of us. Daddy told Father Mack that Jeannie would be starting school at Saint Thomas Aquinas on Monday, but that there was no room in the first grade and that I would be going to Red Seater Elementary School. Brian would stay home with Mommy because there was no room for him in Red Seater as their kindergarten was full.

I was a bit anxious on the drive home from Mass. “Daddy, why is the school called Red Seater,” I asked. Daddy laughed very hard. I always knew I was safe if Daddy laughed. “Timmy, it is not Red Seater. It is Red Cedar. A cedar is a kind of tree, and on campus there are a lot of cedars, red cedars. There is a river that runs through the campus called the Red Cedar River. I think that is how the school got the name Red Cedar.” My dread turned to joy. I had thought they spanked the students a lot and so they had red seats, but I was happy to hear Daddy’s explanation, and I stopped worrying about the school that I would start the next day.

Daddy took Jeannie to school in the car, because Saint Thomas Aquinas was very far from our house. Mommy and Brian walked me to Red Cedar School. We went to the office and met the principal who looked over my transfer grades. The principal asked Mommy a lot of questions. At first, I did not pay any attention to their conversation, but after a while, I could tell they were talking about me, and Mommy seemed to be defending me about something that the principal had asked. I kept hearing things about my age, but none of it made any sense to me. Finally, the principal told Mommy I could start school. She told Mommy that they still had no

room in their kindergarten for Brian, but that they would let her know if an opening occurred.

At dinner that night, Daddy asked Jeannie about her school. "I think the other children are ahead of me in arithmetic, but I am right with the rest of the class in English. We are even using the same book that we had at Saint Columba's."

"How was Red Cedar?" Daddy asked me.

"It was fun. The children cut out shapes that they traced on paper with pencils, and then they glued the shapes to a different colored sheet of paper and wrote their names down on the shapes," I answered adding, "but I didn't have scissors, or glue, or a pencil, so the teacher let me look on, and then I got to collect all the trash that was left over by walking around with the garbage can." Daddy looked at Mommy in a strange way. I wasn't aware that I had said anything wrong, but I knew that Daddy was upset about something because of how he looked at Mommy.

"Did you get to read today?" asked Daddy.

"Teacher said we could read when we wanted to, but mostly we just talked and played all day. This school was much more fun than Saint Columba's. The teacher wore real clothes too, not a nun's outfit. She had on pretty shoes, too. Sister Jeremy had ugly black shoes like grandma."

Mommy said that she and Brian walked home after taking me to school and that she had found a Co-op grocer on campus, but their prices were higher than Piggly-Wiggly and Kroger, so she would not do much shopping there, and weren't Co-ops supposed to be cheaper than other stores?

When we finished eating, Jeannie, Brian and I did the dishes. Jeannie washed and bossed us boys around. “Timmy, you clear; Brinny, you take the garbage out and get the broom.” Then, “Timmy you dry; Brinny you put away and wash the table.” This became the routine every night. Even though we didn’t like being bossed around by Jeannie, we felt good when the dishes were done. Mommy always came in and looked at what we had done and gave us all hugs and kisses. That night, however, Mommy asked me to sit down at the table so she could talk to me.

“Daddy,” she began, “was called by Father Mac today, and he said that an opening in first grade occurred today. So tomorrow, you and Jeannie will go with Daddy to the bus stop down by the Co-op. Saint Thomas Aquinas has a bus that picks up all the children from campus housing. The bus will take you to school. When school is over, you will come home with Jeannie.”

“But Mommy, I like Red Cedar. It was fun, and I made friends,” I pleaded.

“I know, but we think this is best for you. You see Daddy also got a call from Red Cedar, and he was told by your teacher that you might not be ready for first grade,” Mommy divulged.

“I liked it there though. The teacher let me do whatever I wanted.” My pleading now turned to tears did not budge my mother from her mission, and with Daddy there would be no discussion. Gloomily, I went to my room to cry.

The next morning, we were up early. Mommy had turned on the TV, and she was listening to the *Today Show* with Dave Garraway. She said we should look for the weather for East Lansing. Jeannie said she saw Lansing and that the weather



was going to be cold and snowy. I pushed back the curtain in the living room and saw flurries drifting from the sky onto a blanket of freshly fallen snow. I shouted, “Mommy, it’s snowing, and there is snow all over the ground.”

The next voice I heard was not Mommy’s reassuring voice, but rather it was Daddy’s. “All the more reason to sit down and eat your oatmeal. We’re going to have to leave early today, because the roads may be blocked. I don’t want you and Jeannie late for the bus to Saint Thomas.”

Mommy had placed a bowl of oatmeal in front of me. I put sugar and oleo on it. When the oleo had melted, I added cold milk. The melted margarine immediately congealed into tiny amber islands. I slowly ate my breakfast, but speeded up when Daddy said, “Get a move on.” Even with the milk and oleo, the oatmeal was thick as paste and pretty much had the same taste as paste. I gulped it down without breathing through my nose; then I washed the taste out of my mouth with a glass of milk. The milkman had just brought us our milk and it had been left out on the porch in the snow. Jeannie said that the reason the bottle was brown was because that way sunlight did not damage the Vitamin D in the milk. Daddy said it was because the milkman could charge more money. The cold milk was creamy and was the tastiest part of the breakfast that morning.

As Jeannie rose from the table, she said, “Hurry up, or Daddy will get mad.” I picked up my bowl, spoon, and glass and took them to the sink. Mommy put my maroon coat on me. Jeannie led me out to Daddy’s car. He was already inside the car. When we got in, it was very warm inside. We drove from Maple Lane to the

street at the bottom of the hill. Daddy let us out, and I followed Jeannie to the bus stop. Very soon my hands began to get numb, and my ears began to tingle. All the other children had hats and gloves. Even Jeannie had gloves. Finally after a long wait, the school bus came. It was yellow with black stripes and reminded me of the bus in Ottawa except on its side it had the word "Bluebird" written. I asked Jeannie why the bus was yellow if its name was "Bluebird." Before she could answer, the bus came to a stop and the door opened. I was close to the front of the line and was getting ready to step toward the bus when someone bumped me, and I went sprawling face first into the snow. The snow was at least a foot deep and my hands up to my elbows and my face came into contact with freshly fallen powder. When I stood up, I found myself crying as if I had been spanked by daddy with his Army belt. I was nearly blinded by my tears and the snow that still clung to my face. I finally stepped onto the first step of the ladder into the bus, and the bus driver looked at me and said, "Where are your gloves kid?" Through my tears, I choked out, "I-don't-have-any." He reached around to a small box that rested next to his seat and pulled out two red mittens. "Here kid, put these on." I responded, "But they are not mine." Mr. Sump, the bus driver said, "They are now, kid." And he smiled at me with a face as wrinkly as an old apple, and then I saw he had no front teeth on the top or the bottom. "Thank you," I sobbed and went to the first open seat I could find. The bus was very warm and soon the snow that had clung to my pants and jacket began to melt. My pants looked like I had peed in them.

Jeannie came over and sat next to me for the rest of the ride to school. "Are you okay Timmy?" she asked. I nodded "yes." When we arrived at school, Mr. Sump stopped the bus, opened the door, and said in a large voice, "everyone out, and have a nice day. See you all at 4 o'clock."

Jeannie took me to my first grade classroom and introduced me to my first grade teacher, Sister Jane. She gave me a desk in the middle of the room. There were already books inside, but I did not have a pencil or paper, but Sister Jane gave me a pencil and told me to tell my parents I would need "lined paper."

Sister Jane was very old, and she had the shadow of a mustache on her upper lip. She had a very deep voice and she was scary. She did not wear the same kind of clothes as Sister Jeremy. She was all dressed in white, except she wore a black veil on her head. She was short too. She was shorter than Daddy, and one boy in the classroom, John Skippington, was taller than Sister Jane.

Our classroom was not dark like the one at Saint Columba's. We had a wall of windows, and it was very bright in the room. Near the classroom door, there was a pile of snow boots, but some of the girls kept their boots on. In the back of the room were hooks to hang up our coats, and at recess, Sister Jane showed me my hook. I put my gloves inside my pockets of my maroon jacket. All of the girls wore white shirts and green dresses. At Saint Columba's we did not have uniforms, but here the girls did.

Sister Jane gave us a lot of work. We were reading a book called *Dick and Jane*. Sister Jane had us read out loud to the class. When it was my turn, I found

myself stumbling over many of the words. No one laughed. Sister Jane told me the words I did not know. There were a lot of them. At the end of the day, she pinned a note to my shirt and told me to give it to my parents when I got home. By the time I got home, I had forgotten all about the note pinned to my shirt, and I changed into my play clothes and went out to watch TV with Brian. I liked cartoons the best. Somehow, I thought that the cartoon characters were talking to me. Daffy Duck's reality was very much like mine. Things always seemed to go wrong no matter how well he planned them. I never laughed so hard as when I laughed at the antics of the cartoon creations. Fog Horn Leg Horn's loud voice reminded me of Daddy. His lack of success in life also reminded me of Daddy.

Mommy did the wash on Mondays most of the time. When she was going through my clothes, she found a shirt with a note pinned to it. It was the note from Sister Jane to my parents. The note told them that I needed help with reading. She told my parents that I did not know how to sound out words, and that I had a lot of troubles with diphthongs. I learned about this at the dinner table that night when Mommy asked me about a note that Sister Jane had sent home pinned to my shirt. I explained that I had forgotten about the note when I took off my school clothes. Daddy said he had called Sister Jane, and she had hold him that I had a book called Fun da Mentals, but that I seemed not to be using it. He told me to bring it home the next day. He told me to bring all my schoolbooks home the next day.

At St. Thomas Aquinas, the school day began with a Mass service, and St. Thomas Aquinas kept the classroom doors locked until after Mass. At Mass the next

day, I prayed extra hard that I would be able to find the books that Daddy wanted. It was then that I picked up a prayer book that was in the pew. I tried to read the title. The only word I could make out was “book.” I tried very hard to sound out the title, but could not and found myself getting angry, and then realizing that the book could not possibly be correctly titled. The first word in the title started the letter “c.” So far so good. Then an “h” followed. It was here that I gave up, as I knew no words that started with, cuh-ha. My suspicion about this not being a real word was confirmed when I looked at the collection of letters in the middle of the word. “L-d-r” all appeared in a row, and I recalled Sister Jeremy telling us that there were no words with three consecutive consonants. It would be quite a while before I remembered that she had added “in the same syllable.”

Praying to God to intercede on my behalf with my father, and at the same time getting angry in church over a children’s prayer book that had a weird word in it that must have been misspelled seemed to cancel each other out. That night I brought all my books home like Daddy said.

After dinner, but still at the table, Daddy went over my books. He found my Dick and Jane book, a geography book, and a religion book, but he asked, “Where is the Fundamentals Book?” I had to tell him that I did not know where that book was, but that I brought home all the books in my desk. He told Jeannie to go to my classroom the next day, and get the book. “Yes, Daddy,” she replied. After dinner, Daddy took me to Mommy and Daddy’s bedroom so I could read Dick and Jane to him. Haltingly, I struggled over the first sentence, but did succeed in reading all the

words. In this chapter, Dick and Jane were at their grandparents' farm in the country where there were many animals. Then came the unfortunate word "rooster." I could not say the word. At first Daddy was encouraging, "Well say what you think it is, Timmy." Softly, I said, "roster" and Daddy said, "try again." "Roaster, raster, robber, resister, rostrum" all poured from my mouth, and with each one I heard "try again" until the final word, now forgotten, I felt the back of Daddy's hand smack into my face and at the same time a sound called "R-O-O-S-T-E-R" shouted loudly enough so that everyone in our four-plex probably heard it.

Through the tears running out of my eyes, I succeeded in reading the rest of the story, which had no more trick words in it. Then Daddy wrote out several words on a piece of paper. All had two "os" in them. The first was "roof" which I pronounced as "ruff" and was immediately rewarded by Daddy's backhand against my face. The next word was "rooster" and I got that wrong too. Suddenly, there stood in front of me a raging giant of a man who was now pulling his belt off his pants. With each stroke of the belt against my backside I heard, "boots, roof, book (which I had not gotten to), rooster; now say them!" Much to my surprise, I was able to say all the words correctly. As I wiped away my tears, Mommy came in and said, "I think he has had enough, Gene," and with that, the first of many reading lessons with Daddy ended.

One day, another student in the classroom, Tommy Fink, got up and got the garbage can, and walked around the room collecting scraps of paper and anything else the class might have on their desks but wanted to get rid of. As he walked up

and down the aisles, he bumped the can with his knees and it made a sound like a tom-tom, and some of us laughed, but not Sister Jane. She just squinted her eyes and the color of her skin changed to a dark red, but she did not say anything.

We were working on arithmetic the next day using bottle-caps to learn how to add and subtract. I noticed that almost all the girls had bottle-caps but only a few boys had them. I had not heard sister say anything about bottle-caps, and I did not have any. I did not understand what Sister Jane was talking about. I became especially distracted when I told her five and five were ten, but she said, "That is not correct." Someone else in the class added, "Five plus five are ten, Sister." I could tell from Sister Jane's voice that she was pleased with what the other student had said. It was here that I got up and fetched the trashcan and began to walk around the room, banging the can against my kneecaps like Tommy had done the day before. The Boom-boom-boom-boom, Boom-boom-boom-boom sound delighted me as well as several of the other students. By the time, I sat down, I had learned that I could enjoy my day in school by collecting the trash from other students. Sister Jane did not tell me I could not do this. I collected garbage several times a week after this.

Every nine weeks, St. Thomas Aquinas sent out report cards. Every nine weeks I got a thrashing with Daddy's belt. Innocently, I carried my report card home. Sister Jane had a strange way of writing the grades that I could not figure out. She wrote differently than we did. She called it cursive, and I could not read it. Every nine weeks on report night, Mr. Belt, as Daddy called his belt, and I had a warm time getting to know each other. When Daddy was done, he said, "And you

will get three times that many if your grades don't improve." I had counted eight stinging strokes on my butt. I did not know how to multiply, so the next day as Jeannie and I walked back from the bus stop, I asked, "How much is three times eight?" She answered without hesitation, "Twenty-four." I knew I could not live through twenty-four strokes of Daddy's arm. I knew I would die.

On the last day of school, Daddy came to St. Thomas Aquinas. I remembered his visit to St. Columba's and how that changed my life. When I saw Daddy, a deep, cold feeling came over me, but when Daddy picked up my report card from Sister Jane, he was smiling. He said, "Promoted to second grade." None of the other children had their father or mother come to school to pick up report cards. Daddy asked me if I wanted to go home with him, but I lied and said I wanted to stay and play with the other children after school until the buses came. He said, "Okay," and left.

## 6

During the summer between first and second grade, Daddy left for ROTC training with the cadets. He was gone most of the summer as there were two six-week training programs. That was the same summer that Timothy Harold Buckles moved into the barracks with his mom and dad and sister. Mommy got to know them very well, and spent much time talking on the phone to Movelda, Timothy's mother. I thought it was very nice that Timothy and I had the same name. Timothy wore very thick glasses, and had braces on his legs, but he only wore braces some of



the time. They were not there because he was paralyzed, but because his legs were crooked, and the braces were supposed to straighten out his legs.

Timothy's Daddy was a Sergeant in the Army like mine. His family was Protestant, and they did not go to our church. Mommy liked Movelda and never said that they were going to Hell, even though they did not go to our church.

Not far from our house were the Armbrusts. They had two children too. The older was Sharon. She was a year older than me but unlike Jeannie, she was nice to me and never tried to boss me around. Her brother, Bobby, had hair the color of the rising sun. His hair was as wild as a leaf blown by the wind. Bobby was Brinny's age, but he was very much shorter than Brinney. The Armbrusts were not Catholic either, but Mommy and Daddy liked them best of all their friends. The Armbrusts had a Chrysler Imperial and Mommy and Daddy wondered how they could afford such an expensive car.

Across the street from us were the Dawsons. They had a lot of children. They were Catholics too. Mary Jane was in my class, but she was a lot smarter than I and often talked to me like I was a bug. She was not mean to me. She just talked to me like I did not know anything. Dickey was Brinny's age, and we all played together a lot. Their dad was the marching bandleader. Sometimes in the summer we all got together to play baseball in our back yard or to swing on the swing set Daddy bought us. Mary Jane always tried to ride the swing so high that she would do a loopy-loop. While I was watching that never happened. My favorite part of the swing set was the trapeze bar where I could hang by the back of my knees and do all

sort of tricks. I could even do pull-ups, and none of the other children could do that. It was on the trapeze and swing set that I first discovered that I was stronger than my sister and more agile than either Jeannie or Brian, but that did not seem to matter much to them, but I knew it. A strange new feeling came over me when I would realize I could do things on the trapeze or swing set that none one else in the family could do. I liked chin-ups a lot. No one else in the family could do any, but I could do ten at a time, more with a little rest.

When Daddy was away at summer camp, Aunt Margie and Aunt Tee Tee came to visit us, and we all thought that was wonderful. Unlike our family, they seemed to have money and they liked to treat us to nice things. Aunt Margie and Aunt Tee Tee did not have children. Mommy said Aunt Margie did not have children because her father kicked like a football when she was a baby. Mommy said Aunt Tee Tee did not have children, because she was not married. That summer they took us to see *Peter Pan* and other movies. *Peter Pan* was the first movie I had seen that was in color. Daddy always sent us to the Lucan or State Theatres, but they only showed movies in black and white. Mommy's sisters took us to downtown East Lansing where we could see movies in color.

After the movies, Aunt Margie would take us to Woolworth's for lunch. I always got a BLT with French fries and a cherry Coke, even if it was Friday. One time while in Woolworth's we walked past a cage full of pretty birds. Some were pink, others red, while some were white or yellow or green or blue. For every bird, there was a different color. "Timmy, those are parakeets," Aunt Margie said to me.

They were two dollars apiece, and before the summer was over, I owned six of them. Each one was a different color. My favorite was the pumpkin colored bird.

We would drive to Lake Lansing and swim. Mommy would make potato salad and baked beans. Sometimes we would have hamburgers, but most of the time we had hot dogs. We would get to the lake early most mornings and stay until the sunset. Mommy and her sisters kept a sharp eye on us while we were in the water. There were little rooms to change into and out of our bathing suits. One day Brian and I were changing when an old man came in. "Morning boys," he chirped. "Fine day for a swim." When he took off his pants and underwear, Brian and I were amazed to see that he had thick wiry hair all over his private parts, and that he was very big. It was the first time either of us had seen this, and we talked quietly about it for some days afterward. We hoped that whatever had happened to that man never happened to us. Neither of us told Mommy or Jeannie what we had seen.

That entire summer, Mommy let us stay up until long past dark, and we could watch all the TV that we wanted to watch. Brian and I would wander for hours across the campus. We would go to the practice football field and watch the MSU team do summer drills. This came to an end one day when Mommy said, "Kids, I have some wonderful news; it's from your Daddy," said Mommy. "He's coming home tomorrow from summer camp. They have completed all their training and drills." Mommy sounded like she wanted Daddy to come home. This was just the opposite of how I took the news. My whole summer had been a time of peace and rest. My brother and sister and I had played all summer long. We had played from

sunup to dinner. At night, we watched TV. Mommy sometimes made homemade pizza. We ate popcorn and drank Kool-Aid. Mommy had found new flavors of Kool-Aid every week, and we never got tired of the new tastes. We played until it was dark on days that TV bored us. Sure enough, the next morning when Brian and I got up we saw Daddy's duffle bag in the kitchen next to the dinner table. We knew Daddy was home. A strange feeling came over us. It seemed like the sun had gone behind dark clouds and would not come out for nine more months.

After breakfast, we went out to play with our friends. Timothy Buckles' dad was home too, but he wanted to stay in the house that first morning and wait for his Daddy to get up. We went down to Bobby Armbrust's to play with him. His dad was up. Bobby asked if he could go out and play, and Mr. Armbrust said it was okay. We decided we would play catch in the backyard at the Armbrust's. Sharon and some of her friends joined us after a while. Then we formed teams. I was on Sharon's team. We played for hours, but Mary, Bobby's mom, yelled out the door, "Timmy and Brian, your mother wants you both home pronto. It's lunchtime.

Brian and I walked home very slowly. We wondered aloud what Daddy would be like. We knew he would find something wrong. He always did. We talked about what he might find wrong as we walked, but we could not think of anything we did that was wrong. Hoping for the best, we went into the house. Daddy was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette. We both ran up to him and gave him a big hug. "Go wash up boys; your mom has lunch ready," Daddy said, and we ran like lightning chased us to the bathroom. When we sat down, Mommy brought us a

plate of grilled cheese sandwiches made with real Velveeta Cheese and grilled it until every thing melted and the cheese oozed out between the pieces of bread like a river going over its bank. Next, Momma scooped Campbell's Tomato soup into our bowls. There was a pitcher of Kool-Aid on the table, and we helped ourselves to this. Then Mommy asked Daddy what he would like to drink. "What do you have, hun?" he said. Mommy replied, coffee, milk, water, Kool-Aid...or you could have a ginger ale that the kids put in the fridge yesterday," Mommy answered.

"Ginger ale," said Daddy. "I have not had a ginger ale in a long time. Let me have that." Mommy pulled out a bottle from the six-pack Brian had put in the refrigerator to cool the day before. She asked, "Do you want a glass or is the bottle all right?" Daddy seemed curious about the bottle. "Let me have the bottle," he said. Mommy opened the bottle and then she gave it to Daddy. He looked at the bottle for a while. "I have not seen Vernor's Ginger Ale in years," he said. Where did you get it?"

"Timmy and Brian got it yesterday," answered Mommy innocently.

"They did? Where did you get the money for this?" Daddy asked.

Neither of us answered the question. I did not answer because I did not bring the ginger ale home. Brian did not answer the question because he knew something about these sodas that he had not shared with me. Finally an involuntary, "We found it at the Co-op," worked its way out of my mouth through the brew of tomato soup and half chewed grilled cheese sandwich. Then there was a moment of silence, a long moment of silence something like the distance between

the bolt of lightening and the sound of thunder, but before anything else happened, Brinney said, “ I was waiting for Timmy, and a man left his six pack by the door of the Co-op. Then he got on his bike and rode away. I waited, but he never came back, so I took the six pack and put it in a shopping cart so it would not get broken or trip anyone; then I waited for Timmy to finish shopping.”

I had not heard this version of the story before and knew that any moment Daddy was going to unleash his wrath. The story I had heard had the ginger ale already in the shopping cart, the same shopping cart that was later abandoned by the owner of the six-pack. That was the story Brinney had hooked me with; now he was telling a different story, but my name kept on getting mentioned. Brinney sat across the table from Daddy, but I sat next to Daddy. Daddy’s backhand slaps were so quick that I never saw them coming, and I sensed that one was about to erupt from his hands. Then Daddy said something amazing, but it would not be the last time he did something amazing when it came to Briney. “Well, it would be hard to say you stole the ginger ale, but it was probably best that you just left it there. You don’t know if the owner left it by the door because he was only a short ride away, maybe in the dorms. He might have planned on coming back for it, but I can see how you thought it had been left. I would not do that again if I were you.” Then Daddy lifted the icy cold bottle of Vernor’s Ginger Ale to his lips and took a long swig from it. “Wow, that is a taste from my childhood,” he said, and we all went back to eating our lunch.

# 7

The next Monday was Labor Day, and Daddy was home from work. He and Mommy were preparing a picnic. We were going to go to Potter's Park and spend the day. Daddy bought a football for the occasion. It was white with a black stripe at either end. I had never seen such a unique looking ball before, and I looked forward to the day at the park.

Potter's Park was crowded. We drove around for a long time before Daddy was able to park the car. We unloaded all the picnic items, basket, blanket, and ball and headed to a spot that was flat and grassy. Then Daddy sent Jeannie, Brian and me to find twigs for the fire. We took a paper bag with us so that we could put all of our twigs in it. After what seemed a long time the bag was nearly full of twigs of assorted lengths, and we returned to the blanket. Daddy had cleaned the grill that was near our site and Mommy was putting out plastic plates, glasses, and napkins. We gave the bag to Daddy. He had brought some newspaper and wadded that up. Then he put a heap of twigs on top of the paper and lit the paper with his cigarette lighter. In an instant, a huge plume of smoke arose from out of the twigs, then an orange flame appeared and all the smoke was gone. Daddy heaped several more handfuls of twigs on the fire. More smoke, but then orange and red fire ate the smoke, and Daddy seemed to be almost gleeful at the process. "Mayme, give me the burgers. The fire's ready," he said as he stepped back from the flame. He rubbed his eyes to get the smoke out of them.

Mommy had made five very large hamburgers, and on the side of the plate was a heaping pile of Velveeta cheese slices for something my parents called “cheeseburgers.” Velveeta cheese disgusted me. It screamed about our poverty. On Friday’s Mommy would carve a three-inch chunk of this cheese onto two slices of bread and call it a cheese sandwich. I hated Velveeta, and I did not look forward to my hamburger being covered in this cheese that both of my parents seemed to be in love with at the moment. As the burgers began to cook, wild yellow flames leaped out of the grill and made great sizzling sounds. The smell of the cooking meat was almost too much to bear, and my stomach began to growl in anticipation of what we were to have for lunch. Mommy had brought a loaf of Wonder Bread so we could have hamburger sandwiches. “Who wants their bread toasted?” asked Daddy. Mommy said she would like hers toasted, and the idea of eating a hamburger on toasted bread sounded good to me too. “Me,” I said, “but I don’t want cheese, please.” Daddy looked at me in a strange way, but said nothing. Brian and Mommy said they wanted cheese on theirs. By the time the burgers were finished cooking, Daddy had used nearly half the bag of twigs, but then he said, “I’ll save the rest of the twigs for our dessert.” I thought this was a wonderful day. Daddy had not been mad at all, we were having real hamburgers, and after that there would be dessert. Mommy had made potato salad and on her baked beans she placed two strips of bacon on top, and we all ate as if there would be no food for the rest of our lives. Daddy told stories about Labor Day picnics he and his family had had in Illinois when he was a boy. He said they were very fun, because all of his cousins and aunts



and uncles would join his family and spend the whole day eating, playing games, and telling stories.

When the meal was over, Daddy tossed the remaining twigs on the fire, and told us kids to go and get sticks that were about two feet long as he held his two hands apart the appropriate distance. At that moment, I wanted to take a nap, but Jeannie and Brian hopped up so quickly that I was afraid to be left alone, and I joined them in search of sticks. In the weeds not far from our picnic site we found small bushes that had the appropriate size sticks we were looking for. Then Daddy said, "Watch out for poison ivy." We looked around at where we were standing, then somewhat frozen in place we looked at Daddy, who was by now laughing so hard that he doubled over at the sight we must have presented. "He's kidding," said Jeannie and we headed back to the blanket.

On the blanket we saw a large bag of white Stay-Puff Marshmallows. "These are for you kids," said Daddy. We tore open the bag and began to stick the soft, white marshmallows on the end of the sticks. Each of us had our own way of cooking the marshmallows, but from an earlier experience, I remembered that I liked mine crispy and blackened. Maybe it was the thrill of seeing the low blue flame that enveloped the marshmallow, or maybe it was the sweet fragrance the burning marshmallow gave off, or maybe it was just being different from the others in my family, but I enjoyed my version much more than the way Jeannie or Brian did theirs. Eventually, I was able to cook three or four marshmallows at a time this way. I enjoyed pulling the crisp skin off the cooling marshmallow, and then browning the

remainder to the color of oak bark. This required patience and a keen eye for flame would ruin the effect I sought with this second cooking of a marshmallow. I had no idea what my parents thought about this, but they never interfered with my marshmallow cooking.

After this dessert, Daddy picked up the football and said, "Let's play catch." Jeannie, Brian, and I all leaped to the offer. Daddy stood at one end of the area that we picnicked, and told us to go down the field. Then he kicked the football to us. It came down with a tight spiral, but none of us was able to catch it until it bounced a few times. Over and over he would kick the ball, until finally Brian became brave enough to try to catch the ball in flight. On his one and only attempt at this, the ball bounced off his head and into my sister's hands. Daddy came over to see if Brian was all right, and then he suggested that we play catch. He even showed us how to throw a spiral pass, and after a few attempts, we all got to be efficient passers.

We rejoined Mommy who had been packing up the picnic while we played football with Daddy. "We need to be getting home, kids," she said. "We have a lot to do for tomorrow, and I still need to iron some clothes," and with those words the Labor Day picnic came to an end.

At home, Mommy began to run bath water. "Timmy, you're first, then Brian. Jeannie, you can take your bath in the morning." None of this made much sense to me, as we only took baths on Saturdays at home, but then Mommy said words that I dreaded to hear. "Tomorrow morning, Daddy will take you all to school. Brian will go with you because he will be starting first grade at Saint Thomas Aquinas in the

morning. I am so excited to have all three of my children in the same school. I just think that is wonderful.”

My summer that had been as carefree as the summer wind, full of excitement and adventure, and visits from my wealthy aunts, came to a sudden end with the realization that I was about to start second grade.

## 8

Second grade began with many new students in my class. Sister Jane was much friendlier to me, but she was not my teacher anymore. Just before Halloween, a new kid, Tommy Jackson, joined our class. His dad taught ROTC at Michigan State too. He told me he was adopted. I told him that my mom was an orphan, but that no one adopted her, and she lived in the orphanage until she was sixteen. I asked him what the orphanage was like for him, but he said he did not remember, because his parents adopted him right after he was born. “What happened to your parents?” I asked. “They gave me away,” he replied. I did not understand how a baby could be given away, but that was what Tommy said.

There was a ritual in our family that occurred at the time of each first report card of the school year. Jeannie would get lower grades than Daddy wanted her to get, and he would tell her that she needed to study harder and work on improving her grades. Brian always got grades that Daddy liked, and he would tell Brian to “keep up the good work.” My grades were always dismal, and Daddy’s response to poor performance was to spank me. “Go to your bedroom and pull down your

pants," he would say. Then he would say something to Mommy that I could not understand. Then he came into the bedroom and spanked me. For my first report card of second grade, I got four swats of his army belt on my butt. "Now, I expect you to do better next time, Timmy, or you will get more of this." I was in tears as I pulled up my pant, but my inner self was almost gleeful. Daddy had forgotten that he was going to give me twenty-four whacks of the belt like he promised the last time he spanked me for poor grades.

We did not own a car when Daddy left Ottawa for East Lansing. When Daddy picked us up at the train station, we owned a 1949 DeSoto. It was very roomy in the back seat. Jeannie, Brian, and I were not squished in like sardines. Daddy said this car would do until he could afford a newer one. On Sunday's, Daddy would take Mommy out for driving lessons. Mommy was always in a bad mood when she finished her driving lessons, and often snarled at Daddy for days afterward, but always on Sunday they went for a driving lesson.

One day when we came home from school, Mommy was dancing around the house with happiness. "I got my driver's license today kids," she announced. Her joy indicated that it was more than just an announcement. It was like she was set free from something, or like a great debt had been forgiven. "Let's go for a spin," she said. The three of us fresh off the school bus, dropped our books on the kitchen table, and headed out the door to go for a "spin" with Mommy. She took us by the coal piles that fueled the university power plant and as the road was wide and straight, she shifted the car into third and got it up to 40 miles per hour. We rolled

down the windows and the wind in our faces made it feel like we were on a rocket or roller coaster.

Once Mommy started to drive, our world became much larger. Jeannie joined a theater group called "Toy Shop," and began to study acting. It was not long before she had the lead role in *The Wizard of Oz*." She was Dorothy and had a very nice pair of ruby shoes. These shoes had sequins instead of real rubies. She studied her part for many weeks, and attended numerous practices. Then came the big day of her performance. It was the first play I had ever seen. Our whole family was there. I saw Tommy Jackson there too. His sister was one of the munchkins. When the play was over, everyone applauded, and then each of the actors came out for a curtain call. Jeannie received a very long applause and many people shouted "bravo!" To me all this seemed like magic. I told Mommy, I wanted to be in "Toy Shop" too. She told me I would have to wait until the next year, because this was the last show for the season. I was glum over this news, but I had something to look forward to in the coming school year.

In March of second grade, we practiced Irish songs that we would sing for the pastor of our Church, Father Mac. The students in second grade would sing, "*When Irish Hides Their Smiling*." I was very confused by this song. I could not understand why the Irish would want to hide their smile. Even worse was the fact that all the world was "bright and gay when the Irish hide their smiles." We practiced this for weeks before Saint Patrick's Day. For the big day, Sister told all the boys to wear a

white shirt with a tie. The next day we were all set ready to march down the corridor to sing for Father Mac, when Sister pulled me aside.

“Timmy, where is your carnation?” she asked in a tone something like Daddy would use.

“I forgot it, Sister,” was my response. In reality, I did not know we were supposed to have given a paper instruction to our parents who would then make a paper carnation out of toilet paper. My instruction sheet was still in my book bag, somewhere.

“You will just have to stay in the room, Timmy unless you can make one yourself,” said the nun.

“But I am Irish, Sister,” I said, pleading to sing.

“That is not the point. All the other boys have a carnation. I cannot let you go out and sing for the Monseigneur dressed as you are with no carnation,” she said, adding, “Children, line up single file, and we will join the other students in the church.” Once all the other students were out in the corridor, she looked back at me and added, “You wait here.”

On the floor in the classroom, there were bits and pieces of paper carnations. These were parts that had fallen off the shirts as Sister pinned carnations on each of the boys. I was able to gather enough of these discarded flowers to craft a small carnation for myself. I did not know how to pin my flower to my shirt. I went into the corridor holding my flower when from out of the first grade classroom emerged Sister Jane.

“What are you doing in the corridor, Timmy?” she asked.

“I made a flower, Sister, but I can’t attach it to my shirt,” I said with a mild sound of desperation in my voice.

“Here, let me have a look,” she said. I had taken a safety pin from Sister’s desk and handed it to Sister Jane. “I see,” she said, and then she pinned my carnation to my shirt. “Where is your class, now?” she asked.

“In the church,” I answered.

“Let’s go,” she said. Then she took my hand and walked me down to the service. At the entrance to the church, my class waited for the group ahead of them to finish their song. When we reached my class, she said, “Get in line with the boys.” I was so relieved to be able to sing with my class that I am sure I forgot to say “thank you” to Sister Jane. I know I sang off key and loudly, but no one sang more sincerely that day. It would be years before I learned the true words to the song, but that day my tiny Irish voice sang.

Second grade is the time that young Catholics join the church by receiving Holy Communion or the Eucharist. More than a month of preparation is spent on readying the new communicants for this sacrament. The new communicants receive a *Baltimore Catechism* and are expected to study it. My reading skills were still fragile, and I got no further than “Who made me?” To which the reply was “God made me.”

All of the children had to produce a Baptismal Certificate. Somehow my mother had gotten one when I was baptized and had kept it in her Bible. For the

ceremony, boys had to wear a long-sleeved white shirt with a white silk tie. We had black pants and black shoes too. The girls dressed up in chiffon dresses and wore veils. All of their clothes were white including their shoes.

Sister kept telling us that we would soon be partaking of the Body of Christ. That is what she said the wafer was.

One member of the class asked, "Can we chew it, Sister?"

To which Sister answered, "Oh, no! We never chew the host. You wait for it to melt on your tongue, and then you swallow it."

Someone else asked, "What happens if it sticks to the top of my mouth? Can I move it with my finger?"

"Absolutely not. You never touch the Eucharist. Never! You just wait for a few seconds, and it will unstick itself," she said. During one such conversation, Sister mentioned that it was a mortal sin to eat before Communion. "You cannot eat anything after midnight. Mass is at 9:00AM so this should not be a problem for you."

A week before our First Communion, one of the parish priests came in to talk to us about our first confession. One student asked, "What if you have no sins to confess?" He answered, "Everyone of us has something to confess. Maybe you lied, or maybe you did not share with your brother or sister, or maybe you used bad language. Think very hard about what you have done, and remember that God is listening when you are in the confessional. He can see your soul. It would be a sin not to confess all your sins." We would make our first confession on the Saturday before our First Holy Communion Sunday.



I began to think about the things I had done that were sins. I could not actually remember telling a lie. Daddy was too good at detecting lies. I never used bad words. Daddy rarely spoke a sentence that did not have a bad word in it, but he said he would kill us if we ever used bad language. We had so little, that there was never anything to share. I was worried. What should I say? I made up lies. I confessed that I disobeyed Mommy six times. I had used bad words five times. "Back bit my neighbor," I told the priest having no idea what that meant, but it sounded very evil. I was relieved that the priest never asked me what it meant. It worked, because the next thing I knew was that priest told me to "say a good act of contrition and then outside the confessional say one rosary." I was almost giddy with relief as I burst from the confessional box and eagerly joined my classmates at the altar rail to pray my penance.

Mommy was very happy that I was making my First Holy Communion. "Timmy, we are going to have a special breakfast that day. The Armbrusts are coming over and so are the Buckles. What would you like for breakfast that day?"

"I would like a pound of bacon all for myself," I answered.

"Are you sure about that?" asked my mother. I told her I was sure. She tried to explain to me that a pound of bacon was a lot of bacon, but I insisted.

The next day, Daddy taught me how to tie a Windsor knot with a tie. He had to demonstrate it several times, but finally I figured it out once he showed me while we stood in front of the mirror. When we got to church, there were many more cars than usual in the parking lot. Mommy and Daddy took me down to my classroom.

Sister said, "I've got it from here Mrs. Heath." Mommy gave me a kiss and a hug.

Daddy took a picture with his Nikon camera that he had brought home from Japan.

Precisely at 9:00am, Sister marched us into the church. We seated ourselves in the front pew on the left side of the altar. These pews had been marked for us by huge, white, silken bows. For the sermon, Father Mac talked about Holy Communion. It was a long talk, but when it ended we all became excited because we knew that it would only be minutes before we were more like grown ups. We could receive communion and not have to wait in the pew while our parents and big sister went and got their host.

When the priest put the wafer on my tongue, I expected something to happen. I expected it to fizz, or feel sweet, or be heavy. Instead, it had no real flavor at all. I swallowed it as soon as I got up from the altar rail. I saw one girl swishing her host around in her mouth like she was gargling. When we marched out of the church ahead of everyone else at the end of the service, someone said, "Is that all there is?"

When we got home, Daddy took more pictures of me. Then he took pictures of Mommy and me. Then he took pictures of Mommy, Jeannie, Brian and me. "I'll be sending these to Pa," he said, meaning his dad. As we approached our front door, I saw Mary Armbrust step out from inside our house. Mommy had asked her to come early and cook the bacon. Then the Buckles walked over from their house that was just a few yards from ours. Inside the house the aroma of fried bacon made me breath deeply in anticipation of my breakfast.

We almost never drank orange juice, but on this day Mommy made orange juice. All the adults were chatting, so we children settled down to play a game of Monopoly that Bobby Armbrust brought over. The game was well underway when Mommy said, "breakfast is served." Daddy had moved the kitchen table into the living room. Then he put a card table at the end of it. He had borrowed chairs for work. I got to sit at the head of the table. There was a small pile of presents all wrapped in pretty paper along with cards in envelopes all bearing my name. My aunts sent me money. Grandma and Grandpa sent me a card and their love. The presents were all very nice, but mostly they were clothes.

We had scrambled eggs, orange juice, toast, and bacon. Next to my plate, Mommy put a plate of bacon and said, "I hope this is what you wanted, sweetie."

I answered, "It is Mommy. Thank you!" Then I began to devour the bacon. To my surprise after about eight pieces I could eat no more. Perhaps it was the mountain of scrambled eggs and the two glasses of juice and the half loaf of buttered toast that filled me up to the point I could eat no more, but I was stuffed after what I had eaten. Bobby Armbrust asked his mother, "Can I go out and play now Mommy?" Mary asked my dad if it would be okay if the kids went out. He said we could leave the table.

Outside, we started to play baseball, but after a short while we decided to play hide and seek. I was "it." I counted to a hundred with my eyes tightly shut, and then shouted, "Here I come ready or not." When I opened my eyes, I did not see anyone. I ran around our fourplex, and then the one opposite us, but I found no one.

Then I ran down to the street where the sidewalk ended. It was about here that I began to feel something very strange in my stomach. I saw my sister hiding behind a bush. I shouted, "I see you Jeannie," and then ran to the spot in the yard we had agreed would be the base. In this case, it was the swing set Daddy had bought us. Jeannie was four years older than me and very quick. I raced with all my heart to get back to the swing, but she got ahead of me and tagged the base and called that she was free. Once she touched the base, she turned to look at me. I had stopped running by this time and began the slow process of vomiting up my breakfast, eggs, toast, orange juice, and of course my eight pieces of bacon. It took four, long, deep heaves to clear everything out. The only good thing that came out of this was that Jeannie agreed to be "it" in the next game.

The following day, I told Mommy I wanted to carry my breakfast to school. "Whatever for, Timmy?" she asked. "All the other children will be going to Communion today, and I want to also," I said. Actually, I wanted to go to Communion so that no one would think that I had committed a mortal sin on Sunday and thus was not eligible to go to Communion. "I don't think the other children will be going to communion today. They just made their First Holy Communion yesterday. Why would they want to go to Communion today?" It was no use. Even my tears would not convince my mother to pack my breakfast so I could go to communion. Instead she plopped a large bowl of steaming oatmeal down in front of me. Later she brought me two pieces of toast with margarine and cinnamon on it. After I ate my breakfast, I slowly walked to the bus stop.

Mr. Sump dropped us off at school as usual. When I went into the church, I saw my classmates sitting in a group, and I joined them. When it was time for Communion, all of them got up and received Communion. I was the only one still sitting in my pew. One of my classmates whispered as she passed by me, "Why didn't you go to Communion?" I answered back in a whisper, "My mom said that I would be the only person going to Communion today since yesterday was our First Communion." She frowned when I gave this explanation, but she said nothing further. The next day, after I carefully and tearfully explained to Mommy what had happened, Mommy packed me a breakfast of Cheerios and toast. She gave me a dime so I could buy a half-pint of milk. On this day, only three of us went to communion. Sister excused the students who were eating their breakfast after Communion from having to participate in the lesson she taught early in the morning. We ate at our desks. We had to put a piece of oilcloth on top of our desk so we did not soil it. I went to Communion a lot. Several other students did too.

The last week of school soon arrived. Second grade was coming to an end. At the end of the year we had a school picnic. There would be hotdogs, hamburgers, potato salad, beans, bread, potato chips, brownies, and cookies as well as sodas. There were games, like the potato race, the three-legged race, and singing too. Sister made an announcement, "The children who have turned in all of their assignments for the semester will be the first to the picnic. Then she called out their names. "You are excused from class, children; go and play." I was not one of those called. Then sister called each of the remaining students to her desk one at a time.

She handed each of us a list of the work we had not turned in during the term. I had two pages of missing assignments. "When you have completed all your assignments bring them to me so I may grade them. If they are correct, you will be dismissed to attend the picnic too like the children who completed all their assignments. If you have errors on your work, you will have to redo those assignments." One by one, the class began to thin out. By noon there were only five of us remaining. By one, we were three. Sister looked at her watch, and announced. "Children, you may go to the picnic now, but I expect you to complete all these assignments before we dismiss class for the summer break." In unison, we said, "Thank you sister," and bolted out the door.

On the last day of school, we turned in our textbooks to Sister. She examined each one of them for damage. Mommy had wrapped all of mine with brown paper bags. When I handed mine to Sister she gave them a quick glance and said, "Timmy, these are in excellent condition, one would hardly know they had been used. You have no fine. Now take your seat." After all the books had been collected, Sister handed out our report cards. She had put each one in an envelope addressed to our parents. Finally, I heard the words I had waited nine months to hear, "Children, class is dismissed. Have a wonderful summer." We all headed to the door and bunched up there like a clot in a vein as we pushed to get free of the room. I headed out to the parking lot, and there I saw Mommy in the DeSoto.

I ran to the car, and gave Mommy a hug and a kiss. Then I handed her the envelope containing my report card. She ripped it open and looked at the grades,

then she turned it over and read aloud, "Promoted to Third Grade." She gave me another hug. It was very hard and long. Then Brian and Jeannie came to the car. One of my friends came up to us and said, "My mom can't get me today. She told me to take the bus home. Would it be all right if I got a ride with you?" I was very happy he would ride with us and Mommy said he could. When we neared the campus, Brian asked Mommy to take the back route and "give her the gun." We rolled down all the windows and Mommy let the car accelerate. When she got it up to 45mph we all started to holler for joy. My friend seemed a bit confused by this. I said to him, "We're doing 45 miles per hour. Isn't that great?" He said to me, "My mom does that backing out of the drive way." He seemed unimpressed by the frightening speed we had just traveled. When we dropped him off at his house, he just got out of the car and never said thanks or anything. Mommy said my friend was a "little snot." That was the last time I saw him.

The following Monday, Daddy left for ROTC summer camp. He would again be gone for three months. He left home before we got up that morning. A few days later, my aunts came to visit us again. We spent much of the summer in the back yard playing with the neighbor children. Mommy told me that Mrs. Buckles wanted me to go over to her house to teach her son how to box.

Timothy Buckles had sandy hair in a crew cut style. He was much taller than I. He wore very thick glasses and had braces, but when I went to their house that day, his braces were gone. Movelda told me he did not need to wear the braces all the time anymore. We had cookies and milk. Movelda had made chocolate chip

cookies. She told me, "I made them special for you, Timmy. I hope you like them." I showed my appreciation by devouring half a dozen of them. Finally, Movelda said, "Timmy, I want you to teach Timmy how to box. Show him how to hold his hands. Show him how to move around."

I had never boxed before, but I acted the way the men on the "Cavalcade of Sports" did when they showed boxing on TV. I jabbed, I ducked, and I danced around a bit, but mostly I made gruesome sounds as I punched the air in front of me. Timmy got a big smile on his face as he watched my antics. As I threw my last air punch, I added, "Like that, Timmy." Then Movelda said, "I've got something for you boys," and she went into the house. A moment later, she reappeared carrying two pairs of burgundy colored boxing gloves. The color reminded me of dried blood I had seen. "Now I want you two boys to put these gloves on and mix it up a bit."

"Are you sure about this Mrs. Buckles?" I asked.

"Oh, it couldn't hurt for you two to have a little fun, now could it?" she said.

I was very concerned for Timothy Buckles because he did not seem very sure on his feet. He had a hard time walking on a sidewalk let alone balancing on his bumpy front lawn. His glasses were thicker than coke bottles; I was not sure he could see very well. "Put the gloves on, boys," said Movelda. We both put on the gloves, but Movelda had to lace them up for us. "Timmy, how long is a round in boxing?" Movelda asked. "Three minutes, Ma'am," I answered. "Then I will time the round with my watch," she said. "Are you sure you want us to do this, Mrs. Buckles," I asked again? "It will be good for you both to mix it up a bit," she said again. Then



she added, "Okay, when I say start, you can begin. Okay, boys, start." On TV, the boxers always shook hands, and I reached out to take Timmy's hand when he slapped me in the face with his left hand. It knocked me back a foot or so, but it did not knock me to the ground, but it smarted, and it shocked me. I looked at Timmy with an expression of complete disbelief. Was I the someone who was going to get hurt? Timmy was not very fast on his feet, so I kept dancing around him to avoid being hit again. He swung at me several times, but never connected. I only managed to hit his gloves, but after the rude start to this match, I was rapidly losing interest in boxing. Timmy took one last wild punch at me that only caught air when I wrapped my arms around him pinning his arms at his side. Timmy was bigger and taller than I, but I was much stronger or at least more coordinated than he was. When I had done this, I said, "They call this a clinch." I held on to Timmy who was struggling for freedom like a beached fish on a hook. Movelda finally said, "Okay, boys, the round is over. Who wants cookies?" We both said "me" at the same time, and Movelda pulled our gloves off our hands. I ate one cookie and told Timmy that I had to go home to help Mommy. Though the walk was very short, I vowed then and there, that I would never box again. A guy could get hurt doing that.

That summer, our aunts stayed only a few weeks with us, but before they left, they bought Brian and me a baby chick each. The little birds were so small that they fit in the palm of our hands. Mommy said we could have them but only if they stayed in a box while in the house. "You can play with the birds outside, but in the house they live in the box. I don't want to clean up bird poop, do you understand?"

We nodded that we understood. Before my aunts left, the birds had grown to about eight inches tall. A few days after they left, we ran out of food for them. Mommy cooked up some hardboiled eggs and chopped up toast for them, then she mixed all this together, and they ate all of it. The next day she went to Woolworth's and bought some birdseed, but Mommy said it was very expensive, and that we would need to do something with the birds soon.

A neighbor across the sidewalk was an animal scientist, and he came over and took the birds. Before he left, he let us say goodbye to them. "Where are you taking them," I asked. He replied, "I have a friend who lives on a farm outside of Lansing. He said he would be glad to take the birds for you. He added, "You can come and visit them anytime you want." That made Brian and me feel much better about giving the birds away. We said goodbye to our chicks, and he left. Brian cried for a long time after that. Mommy made us pizza pie for dinner to make us feel better about things.

Later that same week, Mommy took us to the Piggly-Wiggly to shop for groceries. We spent a long time in the meat section as Mommy compared prices on the various cuts of meat. She bought some hamburger and some bacon. Then she went to the poultry section and began to look at those prices. "Mommy, what kind of meat is poultry?" I asked her. "Well, let's see," she began, "there's duck, turkey, goose, and chicken." Suddenly a connection was made in my brain that made me jump in shock. "Are chickens poultry?" I asked. I looked at the display of bagged birds in the grocers poultry bin. "I guess so," she said. "Are the chickens that Aunt

Mar and Aunt Tee Tee bought us poultry too?" I asked? "Yes, they are," she replied. "Will our chickens be here one day, Mommy?" I asked. "Oh, I don't think so, honey. The man who took your chickens lives on a farm. He will probably keep them as pets. I don't think he sell chickens, but you can ask him if you want," she said. I felt a little better knowing that our birds would not become something people would eat, but now that I knew what chicken was I felt a little sad that one day I might be eating someone's pet. Brian took a more resigned approach to the matter. "We have to eat something don't we," was his solution to the situation. I figured that I liked my chicken more than he liked his. Mine was much larger than his, and before we said good-bye to the birds, mine was developing a very handsome red, comb. Brian's bird was a runt with a small comb not half the size of my bird's. It was easy to see that he did not care for his bird as much as I did for mine.

For the remainder of the summer whenever we had chicken for dinner, I asked my mother if this one was one of our birds. She kept reassuring me that it was not. Before Daddy came back from summer camp, Mommy told me it would not be a wise thing for me to mention to Daddy that Aunt Margie and Aunt Tee Tee had bought us chickens. "Remember how upset he was last year when you had six canaries?" she asked.

I nodded yes, then added, "but Daddy said no more canaries. The chickens were not canaries," I added.

"Yes, that is true. Your dad does not want you to have any more pets. He said you can't take care of them."

“But you take care of them for me Mommy,” I said.

“That’s why Daddy does not want you to have a pet. He does not think you are ready to care for animals,” she said.

I grew silent for a while, and added, “Mommy, thank you for taking care of my birds.”

That night, Daddy came home very late from summer camp.

## 9

The next morning, Brian and I got up to watch cartoons. Daddy was already up and in the kitchen drinking coffee and smoking his cigarettes. He smoked three packs a day and drank two pots of coffee before he went to work. Today, though, he was not dressed in his Army uniform. Today he wore regular clothes. He had made us French toast for breakfast. “My grandmother, Mammam, made the best French toast I have ever had. That was all I could think about while I was with the cadets this summer. French toast. So, I thought I would make some for you two to have before we go to the ROTC stable to clean it out. The breakfast was very good. This was only the second time we had French toast. We wondered what Mommy was doing as she had not gotten up yet. We had not had two forkfuls of our breakfast when Daddy said, “Hurry up. We have a lot of work to do today. I need to get the old ROTC stable cleaned out before Monday. After that, we are going to store our Labor Day party supplies there.”

The old stable was just as Daddy had described it. It was an old stable with large plywood boards that had instructions on them about how to ride a horse, how to jump with your horse, and much more. There were many such plywood boards in the stable. I asked Daddy how old these things were. He told me that the army had not had horses since he had been in it except for the riding team. He said that this stable might have been last used after the First World War, and that was why we were getting rid of all the contents. Brian and I carried an endless number of plywood boards to the garbage bin behind the stable. When we finished with that, Daddy had us start sweeping out the place. After a few hours he said we were done. Daddy said that the building looked very nice and that this would be where the ROTC unit would keep all its party supplies beginning with the one on Monday, Labor Day. "Are we going to the picnic?" I asked.

Daddy responded, "Yes, the entire ROTC Unit is going."

"How many people will be there?" I asked.

"If everyone comes, there should be about eighty people there. We are having ribs, burgers, chicken, hot dogs, potato salad, baked beans, sodas," he said. I couldn't wait for the picnic! Brian was excited about this too. There was never enough food at home, and the idea of eating all the things that Daddy mentioned only enhanced our desire to go to the picnic.

That Sunday, Mommy was not well, so Daddy took us to church. We usually went to mass at the new church at school, but on this Sunday, we went to the old Saint Thomas in downtown East Lansing. Brian and I sat listlessly in the pew during

the sermon. We did a lot of yawning because we did not understand what the priest was talking about when he tried to explain three persons in one God--the Holy Trinity. Jeannie worked at cleaning the dirt out from under her fingernails, and Daddy seemed to listen attentively to everything the priest had to say.

When we got home, Mommy had made us breakfast and she asked Daddy how the Mass was. This was the first time he had taken us to Mass without Mommy. "Mass was good. The priest gave a really good sermon on the Holy Trinity. The kids, on the other hand, got nothing out of the Mass. Timmy and Brian yawned all the way through the sermon and did not pay much attention to the Mass once the sermon was done. Jeannie spent most of the sermon picking the dirt out of her nails. I was ashamed of their behavior in church today. I better never have that happen again." Before Daddy had finished speaking, the three of us had disappeared to the safety of our bedroom. Once Daddy was done talking, Mommy asked, "Should we have breakfast, Gene?" We ate in silence awaiting some kind of angry words from Daddy, but they never came. Daddy had never said anything about Jeannie that was not praise before this day. I did not know what this meant, but it surprised me.

The next day we went to the ROTC picnic. It was held in the park across from St. Thomas Aquinas. It was the same park where the school had the end of year picnic. I saw Tommy Jackson there, and we hung out for a while. I knew some of the other children, because they went to Saint Thomas Aquinas, but most of the children I had never seen before. Mommy told me later that was because most of them went to public schools like Red Cedar. Daddy called me over to him. He wanted me to

meet a new boy who would be in the third grade with me. "Timmy, this is Master Sergeant Gallardo, and his sons Ronny and Raymond." I said hello to both of them; then, I noticed that Ronnie had something on his right hand; it looked like a metal rod. Then I saw the braces on his legs. "The Gallardos have a daughter too, but she is not here today."

At the end of the picnic, they called all the children together and announced that the final event of the day would be a greased pig contest. "We have a greased pig in this gunny sack," said the Commanding Officer, "the lucky child who catches the pig gets to take the pig home. Let's form a big circle, kids." We spread out at arms length and the circle expanded in width. Then the CO went into the center of the ring formed by all us kids. "I'm going to let the pig out, and whoever catches it gets to keep it." All I could think of was having a pet pig and wanted to catch it very much. The CO lifted the bag up and out fell a pink pig about two feet long. It must have been very frightened because it took off running the instant it hit the ground. In a few seconds it reached the edge of the circle and burst through it. The adult shooed the pig back toward us. I saw it coming toward me, but then it turned and went under a picnic table and stopped. It breathed heavily and sort of froze. I ran to catch the pig and had my hand on its foot. I had it. I had a pet pig. Then my brother came crashing into me almost like he was trying to tackle the pig. The moment he hit me, I lost my grip, and the pig was free. I continued to chase the pig, but a blond haired girl I had never seen before soon caught it. "We have a winner," said the CO as he handed the blonde haired girl the gunnysack.

On the way home, we all talked about the picnic and how much fun we had. I said that I had caught the pig for a few seconds. Daddy said, "Well, you're lucky you didn't because if you had, we would be eating it for dinner next weekend." I did not know if I should laugh or cry. The idea I had was to make the pig a pet, but my dad saw things differently. I wondered if he really would have turned a pet pig into food.

As we entered the house, the phone was ringing. Mommy took the call. "Yes, I see. Yes, I understand. Second shift. There will be a bus in the afternoon at the same stop. Yes, Thank you." Mommy explained to me that with the construction going on at school they did not have enough room for all the students at one time, so they were going to run two shifts for third grade. I was in the afternoon shift. The next morning, Brian and Jeannie headed off to school as usual, but I stayed home with Mommy. At 11:30am she walked me down to the bus stop. We waited for a long time, but no bus came. We walked home, and Mommy called the school. I was enjoying my first day of school so far, but then Mommy said that someone would come to the house to get me and take me to school. About fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door. "I'm here to take Timmy Heath to school," said a young man with sandy hair. He told Mommy he was the brother of one of the priests in town for a week. Mommy walked us out to the car, and a few minutes later we were at school. Class started at 1pm, and I was on time. I entered the classroom and third grade began.



# 10

The first face I saw in the classroom that morning was Tommy Jackson's. He was seated in one of the desks toward the back of the classroom near the windows. The desk in front of him was empty. I decided I would sit there. Dale Parish came in after me, and he sat in the row next to us that was by the windows. Third grade was starting out to be fun. The nun had not come into the room even though the clock said 1:10pm. One of the students suggested that we get out our songbook and sing. Another student suggested we sing, "Pop goes the Weasel." Everyone giggled their approval as we opened our book to the appropriate page and began singing. At the refrain, "Pop goes the Weasel," Charlene Hanson, a very tall girl, jumped up into the air without warning. I thought that was a great thing to do and so did most of the class, because when that refrain came around again almost all of us jumped up into the air. We could hardly contain ourselves as our joy with the words and music had a mood-changing effect on us, but just as we jumped, in walked the nun. "What is this?" she demanded in a stern and angry voice. Someone tried to explain to the nun why we were singing, but she said, "There will be no such disgraceful nonsense like that any more in this classroom. Do you hear?" Someone said, "Yes sister." The nun responded, "Now take your seats, and let's get started."

"The first order of business will be the signing for books. Take all the books out of your desk. I will come by and inventory each stack. These are your books for the year. You may mark in the arithmetic book and in the phonics book, but those

are the only books you may mark. You will all have your books covered when you return to class tomorrow. When you leave today, take all your books with you. Bring them all back tomorrow covered. Now let's get started."

One student in the classroom was wearing a Cub Scout uniform. It was a deep blue outfit, and he had a yellow and blue scarf around his neck. I thought the outfit looked really nice. I had seen other boys wearing the same outfit before, but none of them was ever in my class. They always seemed to be older boys. At recess, I asked the boy about becoming a Cub Scout. I did not remember a thing sister said during the rest of the day, but when I got home, I told Mommy about Cub Scouts, and that I wanted to be one, though I had no idea what they were or what they did. Mommy said she would find out for me. A couple of weeks later, I was enrolled in a Cub Scout Den, and Mrs. Ford was my den mother.

The school bus took me to her. It was not on the Michigan State campus, but out in the country. The bus driver, Mr. Sump, told me he knew where the house was and that he would tell me when to get off the bus. After a very long drive, Mr. Sump hollered, "Timmy, this is your stop. Mrs. Ford's house is the white one across the street." At this stop, the twins, Darryl and Dwayne Glick, also got off, as did a lot of other older kids. I asked them, "Is this your stop too?" They acted like they did not hear or see me and just kept walking. I wondered if they ignored me because they thought I was dumb. They kept walking past Mrs. Ford's house as I went up the staircase leading to her front door and rang the doorbell.

Mrs. Ford was older than Mommy, but she was very nice. She asked my name. She asked for my dues. She gave me papers to give to Mommy. "These papers will explain the rules to your mother. She will find information about where to buy your uniform. Please don't lose these. Make sure your mother signs all the documents. Next week you can bring them back. Maybe by then you will have a uniform. Now let's join the rest of the den." We went into the living room, and while there were a lot of boys there, none of them was the boy from my class. I asked Mrs. Ford about this, and she answered, "There are a lot of Cub Scout dens, and he is probably in one of the others." At the first meeting I attended, we worked on making masks for Halloween. This would be followed by gifts for Christmas, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Mommy and Daddy each got a hand-made, fired clay ashtray for their cigarettes. I was very proud of my accomplishment as an ashtray maker. Mine even had indentations so that a lit cigarette could be placed in the ashtray and it would not roll out. The items I made in my first year in Cub Scouts were the first presents I had ever given my parents, though in second grade I had signed a pledge stating I would say 100 rosaries and 1,000,000 aspirations, even though I had no idea what an aspiration was. These were the first real gifts I had ever given anyone. I felt good about myself because I could give a present to my parents.

Not long after the start of the school year, some of the older boys visited my class. These boys called themselves Knights of the Altar. Really they were altar boys. They explained what altar boys did and why this was important. We were

told further information would be available at a meeting on Saturday morning. This meant that I would miss the cartoon shows that were salve to my soul, but being an altar boy sounded important, fun, and interesting.

I asked Mommy if she would take me to school on Saturday, but she told me that Daddy would need the car that day for ROTC, and I should ask him. Daddy said he had to be at work at 8:00am, but he could drop me off at school at 7:30. The meeting was at 9:00am right after eight o'clock mass. When I agreed to this, Daddy said he would get me up at 6:30 so that I would be ready when he left. I waited all week for the Saturday meeting. Except for the anticipation of Christmas, I had never before looked forward to anything as much as the Knights of the Altar meeting I would attend.

Saturday morning Daddy woke me at 6:30. When I came out to the kitchen, I saw that he had made me a bowl of oatmeal for my breakfast. I gagged it down. We left a little before 7:30am, and soon we were at the church. Daddy dropped me off near the church entrance and told me to call when I was done. Then he sped out of the parking lot and went to ROTC. I looked around for other boys, but I was alone at the church. I walked to the entrance of the church and pulled on the door, but it was locked. Then I walked down to the entrance of the school, but it was locked too. I peeked in the windows to see if anyone was inside the building, but I saw no one. I walked back to the entrance of the church and waited. It was not a long wait.

A black car drove into the parking lot and parked. A priest got out of the car and came toward me. "Top o' the morning to ya, young man. What are you doing

here so early?" he asked. I explained I had come for the altar boy meeting and that Daddy had to drop me off early so he could go to work. "Well, if you want to wait in the church until the meeting that would be fine by me," he responded. I thanked him and went in and sat in one of the pews. By the time mass started, there were a dozen people in the church. I did not see any of my classmates. By the time communion was served, a couple of boys had come in and sat in a pew not far from me. The mass ended with the priest saying, "Ite, missa est." The people in church responded, "Deo gracias." After that the priest and the altar boys left the altar and walked into the sacristy. After Mass, more boys came into the church and sat in the pews. We all just sat there in the pew for a few minutes. Then one of the boys said in a loud whisper, "Are we supposed to wait here, or is there a room that we should go to?" We all looked around at one another to see if anyone had the answer to the question, but all we had was silence as a response to the question. We continued to wait. Finally, one of the altar boys came out from the sacristy and came down to where we sat. "You here for Knights of the Altar?" he asked. We all nodded yes. "Follow me." He led us to one of the classrooms. This room was in the new part of the school where the construction was taking place. There were a dozen folding chairs, a podium, and a table. Another of the altar boys from the morning's mass was there too.

On the table, there were a number of objects that I recognized as being a part of the church service. The two boys introduced themselves and then began to explain what being an altar boy was all about. Then they began to tell us the names

of the object on the table. "This is a paten. This is a P-Y-X," he said spelling out the name. "It is called a pyx. This is a surplice, a chasuble, an alb, a cassock, and a cincture. As altar boys you will only refer to these items by these names. The priests expect you to know what these items are, and more importantly, you are responsible for seeing that these items are clean, cared for, and properly used and when not in use, properly stored. We were all invited up to the table to be quizzed about the name of the object one of the boys pointed to. I was shocked that I remembered the name of each item even though I had never heard these names or words before. The other boys did well too, but this was the first time since starting school that I felt I knew as much as the others did. "Now, we come to the most difficult part of being an altar boy. You must learn all of the responses to what the priest says. It is important that you know the priest's words so that you get the response right, but for now we will go over the altar boy's response." One of the boys played the part of the priest, and the other one responded in Latin with words the altar boys used during mass.

"Before you will be allowed to participate as an acolyte, you will have to pass a test. The test consists of saying the responses to the priest's words." Then we were given several mimeographed sheets of paper with all the words of the Mass on them. The paper had a sweet intoxicating smell about it. I wanted to sniff the paper, but was embarrassed to do so in front of all the others. I just held the paper close to my face as if I were reading its purple words.

Finally, we were escorted to the sacristy. This was a room where all the priest's vestments for Mass were kept. In the center of the room, there was a large wooden case. The case must have been four feet wide and probably as long. It had half dozen drawers. One of the boys opened the top drawer and took out a chasuble. It was bright green. "These are the outer garments that the priests wear while saying Mass. The tradition goes back to the days of Rome. These are clothes that are similar to the clothes that Romans wore in the early days of the Church." He went through the other drawers displaying a number of the other garments, the alb, cinctures that looked like rope belts. On top of the wooden chest there were two small glass bottles with glass stoppers. "These are the cruets that we fill with water and wine for the Mass. You will fill these before Mass and place them on a table near the altar." The last thing he showed us was a closet with a sliding wooden door. "In here are the cassocks and surplices that the priests wear. Ours are in here also. Before Mass, we come in here and select a size that fits us and then we put that on." Before shutting the sliding door, he pulled out a long stick. At the top of the stick was a device that had a candlewick sticking out of it. He explained to us that part of the altar boy's duties was lighting the candles before mass. He gave us a demonstration on how to light the wick using some matches that were in a box on the floor of the closet. I had not lit a fire before. In fact since Brian tried to burn down our War Home, Mommy had forbidden us to touch matches. It seemed that the Catholic Church was not concerned with my family's history with matches. I was secretly delighted that I might be able to light the altar candles one day, even though

we had a firebug in our family. I did not share my family's history with fires. "One final word," he said, "there will be a test in two weeks. Those who pass will be able to become altar boys for the final term of the school year. If you don't pass, then you will have to wait until next year when the next test is given."

It was nearly noon when we finished. Daddy would be at the church soon. All the other boys hopped on their bikes and rode away after the altar boy lesson ended. I sat on the curb and waited for Daddy. While I waited, I looked at the sheets of paper given to us by the older boys. I tried to read the words, but as it was, I was having a hard enough time trying to read Dick and Jane, Latin was truly a foreign language to me. A few minutes later, Daddy pulled up, and I got into the car. He asked how things went, and I told him what I had learned. I told him about the test and my need to be able to say all the responses in Latin. "Well, that should be easy. We can do that phonetically. Then you can memorize the phonetic response." After lunch, Daddy took the mimeographed pages and wrote out the responses in English. "In-tro-ee-boe-odd-al-tar-ee-day-ee," was how we started. In an hour he had written everything out. "Now go and memorize this," he said. Before dinner that day, I had half of the responses memorized. By bedtime, I had memorized all the altar boy's responses.

At school on Monday, I talked with some of the boys that had been at the Altar Boy session on Saturday. None of them had looked at the Latin responses. "Too hard." "Had to help my dad." "Had to help my mom." "Didn't have time." I told



them that I had learned all the responses and began to recite the parts. This impressed them. "How did you do that?" they asked.

"My dad wrote it out for me, and I memorized it." This must have come as a shock to them, because as recently as second grade, I had been kicked off the Christmas pageant for not memorizing my part as Saint Joseph. Daddy had given me a spanking that day. I begged the nun to give me another chance, but she did not. I got another spanking for that too.

"Can you teach us?" they asked anxiously.

"Yeah, we can start tomorrow," I said with an excitement I had never felt before. Someone actually wanted me to do something that he could not do. I could not wait for the final bell of the day. I had great plans for the following day with my classmates.

When I got home, I told Mommy what had happened at school that day. I told her that I would teach my classmates the whole Mass. I went into my bedroom and began to put together my props for the next day. I used the cardboard from a toilet paper roll to which I affixed a square piece of cardboard as my chalice. Then I cut out a number of one-inch circles to simulate hosts for communion. I took several sheets of the Lansing Daily Journal and taped them together. Then I cut them into the shape of a chasuble. I slipped the paper chasuble over my head and walked out of the bedroom with my chalice full of hosts to where Mommy was in the kitchen. "Mommy, look at what I made," I said proudly. Her jaw dropped as she starred at me. "What are you planning to do with all this?" she asked.

“I’m going to take these to school tomorrow, so I can teach the other boys the Mass.”

She gave me a luke-warm, “Oh, I see. Do you think this will be all right with Sister?”

“We are going to practice in one of the new classrooms that no one uses. I think we will be okay,” I innocently replied. I was disappointed that Mommy did not give my efforts to teach the other boys more support. This subject was not mentioned at the dinner table. I knew that Mommy was concerned with what Daddy might think.

At lunchtime the next day, five of us went to one of the classrooms in the new part of the school and began to practice the Mass. We did this everyday for nearly two weeks, until one day a nun looked into the room to see what we were doing. She must have been watching for a while, because when she burst into the room she seemed to have a pretty good idea about what was happening. “Such goings on...mischief makers...God spare us your behavior...” and a string of other such sayings spilled from her mouth. Then she spotted the paten that I had borrowed from the sacristy, and the bells, and the missal from the altar. Finally, she saw the makeshift chalice. “Well at least you didn’t desecrate the body of our Lord by taking a Chalice.” She asked who was responsible for “these shenanigans.” I told her I was. “Put all these things back where they belong,” she said. “I want you to see me in Sister Cyril’s office in five minutes.” She then turned about and walked out of the room. When she left the room, I looked at the eyes of the other boys. I sensed that

they were unhappy with me. I sensed that they felt betrayed by me. I told them I was sorry, and that I would put everything away. The last of them who left the room turned to me and said, "It wasn't your fault. We all agreed to do this." That was my friend Tommy Jackson. His dad was a Captain at the ROTC Unit at Michigan State.

After returning all the items to the sacristy or sanctuary as Sister had directed, I went back to the empty classroom and folded up all my props and put them back into the brown grocery bag I had used to carry them around. Finally, I put the paper bag into the garbage can and walked slowly to Sister Cyril's office.

Sister Cyril had a reputation for being mean. All the boys at school believed she was able to beat them up. It was said she was born the night of the Chicago Fire. She was not just mean; she was also really old. She was Jeannie's teacher now that Jeannie was in seventh grade. Jeannie always tried to be on Sister Cyril's good side, but she seemed to be the only person at Saint Thomas Aquinas who thought Sister Cyril had a good side. I went to the office as the nun had told me. The door was open, but I knocked so as not to seem rude. Sister Cyril looked up at me and asked, "What do you want?"

"I was told to come to see you sister."

"And why were you told to come to see me?" she asked.

"We were practicing the Mass for our altar boy test next week."

"But why are you here?" she asked again.

"Because sister said to come to see you," I answered.

"Did you break something?"

“No,” I answered.

“Tell me about practicing for Mass as you refer to it,” she said.

I explained all that I had done and made, and added that I borrowed some items from the church, but that I had always put them back. Then Sister Cyril said, “Intro ibo ad altare dei.” I gave her the correct response. She asked me a few more questions in Latin to which I gave her the correct response. Then she said, “Sounds to me like the practice worked. Don’t worry about this; I will take care of it. You may leave.” I had expected the world to end before I left Sister Cyril’s office, instead I was feeling pretty good about things. When I left the office, I knew a secret about Sister Cyril. She had a good side.

The next week I passed the altar boy test. So did all the boys who practiced with me.

## 11

During the second semester we studied Michigan history. As a final project, each student was to create some work that represented the state’s history. I planned to draw a wooden fort with a stockade and gate, but I had to ask Daddy to buy a piece of poster paper so I could do my drawing. The Friday before the project was due, I asked Daddy if he would get me poster paper. When he came home that night, he had a piece of poster paper for me. Saturday morning, I began to draw the fort. The picture in the history book showed a fort made of wooden logs that had been sharpened at the top. I faithfully recreated the scene from the book, but I

added a fire, the sun, arrows showering down from the sky, muskets belching fire, and cattle peacefully munching the grass in front of the fort. I was very proud of this work. It was the first time I had ever completed a project. In black crayon, I wrote my name at the top right of the project.

When I finished my poster, I left it on the kitchen table, and went to watch cartoons in the living room with Brian. Jeannie brought me a report she had done for Sister Cyril. It had many pages and was held together by small plastic rings about the size of a quarter. For some reason, Jeannie had put an extra ring on her project. I took the extra ring off and fastened it, harmlessly, to a lamp in the living room. I meant to tell her about it, but forgot.

The next night the whole family was in the living room watching *The Ed Sullivan Show* when Daddy turned on the lamp in the room. He saw the ring and asked in his someone-is-about-to-die-voice, "Who put this here?" There was silence from all of us. He asked again, but no one said anything. Then he ordered Jeannie, Brian, and me to the kitchen. "I'm going to give the guilty party one more chance. Who put this ring on the lamp? There was no answer. Then he said, "I am going to spank all three of you until someone tells me the truth." He began to unbuckle his belt. In a weak voice, I admitted to putting the plastic ring on the lamp. Then he swatted me all the way to the bedroom. He stopped when I got in the room. "Get in bed," he said and slammed the door shut. I was in bed when he came back into the bedroom. This time, instead of a belt in his hand, he was holding my project. He tore it up in front of me. "This is what we do to liars," he said. He tore it up into

many small pieces and left it on the floor. As he walked out, he slammed the bedroom door. The next day in class all the other children turned in their projects. I told sister, I had forgotten to do mine. I lied to her too.

## 12

During my third grade year, Mommy had not been well. She spent a lot of time in bed. Sometimes, women from the neighborhood would come to visit her, but mostly Mommy was alone. She was so sick that she did not cook dinner, and Jeannie would do that when she came home from school. One day when we came home from school, Mommy was not home. Jeannie cooked dinner that night too. Brian and I set the table. It started to get dark. Finally, Daddy came in, but he was not wearing his Army uniform. He said, "Let's eat," and we all sat down at the table. It was a very quiet meal. No one spoke. It was so quiet that I could hear Daddy's jaw pop as he chewed. Then Daddy put down his fork and said, "Mommy had a miscarriage." Jeannie put her hands to her face and began to sob. Brian started to cry so hard that Daddy got up and gave him a hug. He lifted Brian out of his chair and pulled him to himself, and the two of them cried. I had never seen Daddy cry. I had no idea what was going on or why everyone was crying. I asked, "What is a miscarriage?" Daddy said, "Your mother has lost the baby."

I thought to myself, "what baby?" This was not the time to ask questions. I knew something terrible had happened, and it seemed that I was the only one in the family who had no idea as to what it was. As we walked to the bus stop the next day,

I asked Jeannie why Mommy had a miscarriage and what Daddy meant when he said “she lost the baby.” Jeannie answered, “Mommy was pregnant, about six and a half months along.” Not only did I live in an Irish Catholic family, I lived in an asexual family. I had rarely seen my parents kiss, and there was never any discussion of sex. This aspect of life was nonexistent in the life of our family. Later, Brian told me he cried because Jeannie and Daddy were crying, and he thought it was the right thing to do. As I began to think about it, I remembered that Mommy was wearing different kinds of clothes than she had in the past. I never associated the different clothes with anything peculiar about Mommy, and she certainly never mentioned to Brian or me that she had a baby inside of her.

Later, Jeannie told us that Daddy told her the baby was a boy. Brian named him Kevin, and at night in our bedtime prayers, he would say a prayer for Kevin. I did too.

## 13

Shortly after Mommy came home from the hospital, the school year ended, and Daddy went away to ROTC summer camp. Our aunts came to visit and Brian and I developed a new con: “Only ten cents Aunt Mar,” or “Only ten cents Aunt Tee Tee.” That summer we spent most of our time at Lake Lansing, or on picnics at Potters Park, or cooking in the backyard on a charcoal grill with real charcoal that our aunts bought. The big treat of that summer was the week we spent with Bobby Armbrust at the house his parents bought in East Lansing. It was a real house with

carpets in every room and very high ceilings. Bobby's sister, Sharon, showed us crystal goblets that her dad brought home from Germany at the end of the World War II. She said they were handmade and very valuable. I had never seen anything like this. The goblets were made of red and green crystal, and they were very heavy. Sharon told me to be very careful handling them. Our goblets were jelly jars.

It rained a lot that week, so we stayed inside and played Clue, Monopoly, Crazy 8s, Old Maid, Fish, Hearts, and War. We played these games all day long. We ate potato chips and drank Coca Cola too. As long as we did not squabble, Mary, Bobby and Sharon's mother, left us alone. We did very little squabbling that week. On Saturday, Mommy took us home.

On Sunday, Daddy came home from ROTC Summer Camp.

On Monday we had a Labor Day picnic at Potter's Park. On Tuesday, I started fourth grade. This year I went to school with Jeannie and Brian and did not have to do the late shift.

My fourth grade teacher was Sister Theodosia. She looked a lot like Sister Jane. She was short and plump, but she had a hint of a mustache above her upper lip, and like Sister Cyril, we were pretty sure that she too could whip any boy in the school. When we turned our work into Sister Theodosia, she would have us wait at her desk while she corrected it. Then she would give it back to us to fix. I generally got all my work back for corrections. I still did not understand arithmetic. I was getting better at spelling, but I did not understand how to write a paragraph, and I was still a weak reader at best, but I could tell my classmates anything they wanted



to know about Donald Duck, Scrooge McDuck, or Loony-Toons--until Daddy threw out my collection of comic books. Father Mac gave a sermon about how comic books were ruining American youth. Daddy must have agreed. The next day when garbage men came to pick up the trash, there were two three-foot tall piles of comics at curbside when we went to the bus stop. I wanted to take a few comics back home, but Brian said that Daddy was probably watching from work, and he would know if I took a comic. Then there would be real trouble. When I came home from school that day, my comics were gone forever.

Sister Theodosia called our house regularly, and I became the focus of Daddy's attention after each of these calls. "Into the bedroom and pull down your pants," could have been the motto of my fourth grade. I began to realize something that year. Daddy's swats seemed to hurt less than in the past. While I hated getting spanked, the pain soon passed, and I could continue my life for a while or until the next spanking. Sister Theodosia's calls to the house did cause me to improve my spelling and my writing, but arithmetic and reading remained ever-present reasons for parental concern. Because of Daddy's belt, they were also concerns of mine too.

## 14

After a few weeks of Cub Scouts with Mrs. Ford in fourth grade, she introduced us to our new den mother. From out of Mrs. Ford's kitchen came Mommy. "This is Mayme Heath; she will be your new Cub Scout den mother for the coming year." Everyone cheered, and I ran up to Mommy and gave her a big hug. I

gave Mrs. Ford a big hug too. There were a lot of new boys in our den. Most of them were boys from St. Thomas Aquinas. This year, Brian was a Cub Scout too. With Mrs. Ford's guidance, I had become a Wolf Cub Scout. Mommy asked all the boys how far we wanted to go as Scouts this year, and I yelled, "Bear Scout!" The other boys had other goals. Mommy said that if we put our minds to it we could all get to our goal.

On the drive home, Mommy asked me what my plan was to become a Bear Scout, and I told her I did not know. She said we should sit down after dinner and go over the Cub Scout book to learn what we needed to know to achieve the new rank. When the dishes were done, Mommy called me back to the table. She had the Cub Scout book on the table, and she had me read the requirements for Bear Cub Scout. As I stumbled over the words, Mommy corrected me, and by the time I got to the end of the requirements, I was able to read them without error. Then Mommy had me read the requirements for Lion Cub Scout to her. Both of these ranks required many electives to be completed, and for completing electives, a Cub Scout earned Arrowheads. Mommy spent over an hour with me reviewing all the requirements for the new ranks and the Arrowheads. "Now you know what you have to do. So each day, I want you to do something that will lead to an Arrowhead and to the new rank you want to achieve." I was very happy that Mommy had shown me what I needed to know in order to be able to advance as a Cub Scout. I was happy that she gave me special time with her. It was rare that I felt like someone cared about me.

I soon found myself making my bed, willingly setting the table, washing dishes, taking out the garbage, and helping Mommy when she went grocery shopping. I was more polite to Brian and Jeannie. All of this was done for the sake of silver and gold arrowheads for my scout's uniform. By Christmas, I had earned my Bear Cub Scout rank and was well on my way to Lion. I had other activities.

That year, Brian became an altar boy too. I helped him learn the altar boy responses, but he did not like it when I played priest, so we would just lie on our beds, and I would say the priest's part, and Brian would give the altar boy response. It was not long before the two of us were teamed up as altar boys for the same church service. Daddy seemed to like this; because everyone in church knew whose sons the altar boys were when we assisted at Mass.

At St. Thomas Aquinas, there were always four altar boys for all the services. One of the things we learned when we were being trained to be altar boys was that each of the servers positions had a name. The most important position was called "Main Book." This was the altar boy who moved the big missal on the altar from one side to the other. The next position was called "Main Bell." This altar boy rang the bells during the service. The next two positions were not so glamorous. These were the position of "Dumb Book" and "Dumb Bell." Mostly these two positions just observed the Mass. Occasionally, if there were enough priests serving communion "Dumb Book" might get to hold a paten under the throat of those receiving communion. "Dumb Bell" just remained at the altar kneeling the whole time communion was going on.

The first time Brian served at Mass was a Sunday, I was “Main Bell” and he was “Dumb Bell.” When we got home, Daddy asked me if I knew why they rang bells during Mass. I told him it was because something important was going to happen, and everyone needed to know that. He said that was not right. He said, “In the olden days they rang the bells to get people to pay attention, because in days gone by, people used to talk, do business, and participate in card games during Mass. This was a call to those people to pay attention. Because people nowadays pay attention, Timmy, you might want to think about how you ring the bells in the future.” That was all he said about the first time Brian and I served Mass together. I thought ringing the bells one of the most important parts of the Mass, and I wanted to do it well, but it seemed I did it poorly. I felt badly about Daddy’s comment. I felt worse for Brian.

## 15

As the school year drew to a close, Jeannie was excited about a school dance she was going to attend. A boy by the name of Larry Hamilton had asked her to go out with him. Mommy bought Jeannie a new dress for the dance and new shoes too. Larry’s dad owned a car dealership in town, and he was a popular boy in his class. Jeannie looked very pretty in her new dress and shoes as she walked out the door on her first date. Daddy took her to school where the dance was to be held. A couple of hours later, the phone rang and Mommy answered it. “I’ll be right there to get you, honey,” I heard Mommy say. Then she got her keys and purse and told Brian and me

to stay quiet. "Boys, if Daddy gets up, tell him I went to get Jeannie from the dance." About an hour later, Mommy and Jeannie were home. Jeannie's face and eyes were red from hard crying when she walked into the house. Her nose was swollen and the color of a purple plum. She went straight to the bedroom. She shared a bedroom with Mommy ever since Mommy lost the baby. Daddy slept in our bedroom. As she passed me, I tried to ask her what was the matter, but all I got out of her was whimpering. I did not know what had happened on her first date, but I knew something bad had happened.

The next morning, we went to Sunday Mass, but Jeannie stayed home. Mommy said Jeannie was not feeling well. At church, several people noticed that Jeannie was not with us, and they asked about her whereabouts. As we walked to our car, a group of girls, who were in eighth grade with Jeannie asked about her. Mommy just said, "She is not feeling well." As we left the group of girls one of them said loudly enough to be heard, "We are going to give Larry the cold shoulder for standing up Jeannie." When we arrived home, Jeannie had cooked breakfast for the family. No one mentioned what had happened the night before, and there was never again any mention of the dance, Larry Hamilton, or dating. We never discussed the bad things that happened to our family.

The month before school ended, Mommy and Daddy spent a lot of time away from the house on the weekends. One Sunday, Mommy came home in raggedy clothes that had paint all over them. She wore a bandana on her head, and her hands had paint stains on them from several different colors of paint. When Daddy

came home later that afternoon, his clothes were covered in paint too. We knew that Mommy and Daddy were doing something on the weekends, but just exactly what that was remained a mystery. As we sat down for dinner one Sunday, Mommy said that she and Daddy had a secret that they wanted to share. With great anticipation we waited for Mommy to tell us the big secret.

“Well, kids, as you know for the past month or so, Daddy and I have been away on the weekends for many hours at a time. The project that we have been working on is complete. We have been painting all the rooms in our new house,” Mommy said.

Brian asked, “Are we buying a house like the Armbrusts?”

“No, honey, we are not buying a house. We are renting a house. It is much larger than this house and has two stories and a basement. It has three bedrooms, and a front and back porch. It also has a large yard. It’s about a block from the Frandor Shopping Center,” Momma added.

Daddy said, “The movers will be here next Friday. I will bring boxes home on Monday. We will pack up all of our own clothes. Your mother will do the kitchen. The movers will do the rest.”

“Will we come home here at the end of school, or will you pick us up and take us to the new house,” asked Jeannie.

Mommy said, “You’ll go to school on the bus, but I will be there to pick you up when the day is done. Won’t this be fun?” We were all very happy to be moving, especially Brian and me. We were very tired of Daddy sleeping in our room, but

more than that we were very tired of his snoring and his early rising. Daddy always got up at 4:30am.

Mommy was waiting in the parking lot on the last day of school. "The movers have already been to the house and dropped off all of our things. Your things are in boxes in your rooms. You will need to empty the boxes as quickly as you can. We want Daddy to come home to a beautiful and neat house." We were all in agreement with Mommy on that point. Daddy hated messes. We knew we could keep him from screaming and yelling if we could make the house neat before he came home.

The movers had assembled our bunk beds, and Mommy had put sheets and blankets on them. Brian and I put on our bedspreads. Next we found the boxes with our clothes in them. We each had a dresser, and we put our clothes in the drawers as neatly as we could. The next box had our hanging clothes in it. Behind the bunk beds there was a walk-in closet with a light dangling from the ceiling. The closet was huge and easily held all of our hanging clothes. There was ample shelf room too, and that was where we put all of our games. While we were working in the closet, Mommy came upstairs to see how we were doing with putting things away. It was only when she hollered for us that we heard her. After she left, Brian and I realized that the closet was a great hiding place and playroom. For as long as we lived in that house, whenever we wanted to be left alone, we would play in there. It became our own private world that excluded parents and our older sister. In our bedroom was the door that led to an unfinished room that Mommy and Daddy called the attic. It was a room full of old smells and dust. We stored our Christmas

ornaments in this room, but Brian and I found it to be another excellent place to hide when we did not want to be found. We only had to be quiet, and we would be left alone in the attic. There was another door in our room, and it led to the deck on top of the back porch. On summer nights, Brian and I would go out on the deck to watch the fireworks set off nightly by Frandor Shopping Center. On some nights there would be as many as fifty fireworks exploding just over our heads in dazzling displays of red, green, blue, and white.

When the school year ended, Daddy went off to summer camp again. Unlike previous years, our aunts did not come to visit us, but Mommy made up for their absence. At least twice a week she would take us to the municipal swimming pool. For a dime we could rent a locker. In exchange for our dime, the pool staff gave us a key for the locker. For two hours, we would splash and soak in a real swimming pool. The pool was made of blue cement and the water looked like the water surrounding a tropical island I had seen in the *National Geographic Magazine*. At the end of the swimming time, if we returned our key to the front desk we got our dime back. Splashing in the pool was much more fun than soaking at Lake Lansing. First of all, no one ever said that the municipal swimming pool was full of garbage, but a lot of people said swimming in Lake Lansing was like swimming in garbage. Second, if you needed to pee, you could just get out of the pool and go to the bathroom. The lifeguards kept a sharp watch for people misusing the pool in this way. You could lose your dime for this. Finally, the water was very clear and not very deep, so we could play in the shallow part of the pool without Mommy worrying that we would



drown. All three of us stayed in the shallow end, as none of us knew how to swim. On days that we went swimming, Mommy made us BLTs for lunch.

When we lived in the Barracks, we had many friends to play with during the summer, but at our new house there were very few children. It seemed that most of the people who lived near us were old and had no children. At the end of the summer, a new family moved into the house next door. They had one child, Frances. Her dad was in the Army too, but all she wanted to do was play with dolls and knit, and all Brian and I wanted to do was to play baseball and football.

One day as we were scouring the neighborhood for boys our age, we came across Junior. He was Brian's age. When we first met Junior, he was draining oil from old oilcans at the back of a garage next to the ministore on the corner. "What are you doing there?" I asked. Junior replied, "There is a lot of oil left in these cans when they throw them into the garbage pile. If you have enough of these, you can actually make a whole can of oil." He held up a mayonnaise jar that was three-fourth's full of a golden fluid that he called motor oil. "See what I mean," he said as we looked in amazement at what he had collected. "People toss out all sorts of shit like this. My dad says you could get rich just digging through other people's junk." We liked Junior from that moment on. He had to babysit his brothers and sisters so he did not get to play much baseball, but he was always doing interesting things. Not far from his house there was a dump where a tile factory sent its damaged products. Junior would spend hours there looking for useful tiles that his dad would then use in his business. Junior's dad was a contractor. "He fixes houses," Junior

said. Not long after we met Junior, a house was moved to the lot next to Junior's. His dad was going to rebuild the house and then sell it to make money.

Junior was not allowed to let people into his house, but on one occasion he let us in. He showed us how to make tortillas out of flour, grease, and water. Once he made the tortilla, he then cooked it for us. "Here, try this, but this is the last one I can give you. My dad would get mad with me if I fed everyone a tortilla." The one he made for me was crispy and was slightly burned from the grease in the frying pan. Just before he served it to me, he put some kind of cheese on top of the tortilla and then folded the tortilla in half. This tortilla was so tasty that it brought tears to my eyes. The scorched tortilla, the melted cheese, all blended into a heavenly taste on my tongue as I slowly chewed what was to be the only tortilla of my childhood. It was not as good as chocolate, but it was far better than my meatless Friday school lunch: two pieces of Wonder Bread cradling a fist sized chunk of Velveeta Cheese! Mommy called this a cheese sandwich.

Across the street from our house was an open field. In the middle of the field was the red and white transmission tower for WJIM-TV. The tower was said to be over a thousand feet tall. Our house and all the houses in the area were close enough to the tower that if the tower came down it could have destroyed any of a hundred homes.

From our front porch during the summer's thunderstorms, we would watch the television tower waiting for lightening to strike it. Jeannie, Brian, and I were fascinated by these storms. They would come up suddenly and violently, and then

after discharging their angry violence, the world returned to its calm. Sitting out on the porch during thunderstorms became a regular pastime for us both summers that we lived in the house on Howard Street in Lansing Township. Daddy told us that if we counted one potato, two potato and so on after we saw the lightening and stopped when we heard the thunder that would tell you how far away the lightening was in thousands of feet. One day after many lightening strikes of five and six potato, I barely said one and I heard the clap of thunder that rocked the house. We all ran like frightened mice for safety inside the house.

Shortly after we moved into the neighborhood, we noticed that every evening a ball game took place in that same field. It was not long before Brian and I were regular participants in these evening games. Brian was pretty good at hitting the ball and getting on base. I never remember getting a hit, but I was thrilled when I would make contact with the ball instead of striking out as I usually did. No one could match my enthusiasm for the game. I was always the first boy out on the field waiting patiently for the other players.

We played ball until it was dark. Mommy usually had to call us home. We liked playing ball more than we liked watching TV. On nights that we did not play ball, we would play hide and seek. Some nights we would play this game for hours. Again, Mommy had to call us in; we enjoyed ourselves so much playing outside of the house.

Daddy came back from ROTC Summer Camp a couple of days before Labor Day. We had another big picnic with all the other ROTC families. This year there

was no pig to be caught. Instead there were games like the three-legged race, wheelbarrow race, and chigger races (walking backwards on hands and feet). Brian and I entered all these contests, but we did not win.

I saw Tommy Jackson at the picnic. He told me that he was going to be in a special fifth-sixth grade class. He said that this year he would have a real teacher instead of a nun. The teacher was Miss Fornocchio. Tommy wanted to know if I would be in that class or the regular class. I asked Mommy on the way home if she had heard from the school. She told me that she had and that I was in the split class. I was excited about being in class with Tommy.

The next day, I met Miss Fornocchio. She had short black hair and a very loud voice. Her eyes were small and as dark and as cold as those of the snakes I had seen in the MSU Museum of Natural History. She told us that she would be teaching the fifth and sixth graders. The only thing that she would not teach would be Religion. Mrs. Fornocchio said a nun would teach that.

Mrs. Fornocchio spent most of her time teaching the sixth graders. Fifth graders were expected to read their lessons while Mrs. Fornocchio taught the older students. When the sixth graders were studying history we were assigned geography. I had two problems with geography. While I knew the location of each state and its capital, I could not spell the names of many of the cities that were capitals. Montpelier was always a difficult one for me even though I knew it was the capital of Vermont. My other problem with geography was that Mrs. Fornocchio told the most interesting history stories while I read about geography. She had a

book called *Livy's History of Rome*, and she told stories out of the book. I was mesmerized by these stories. It seemed that many of the students in her class did not like history, because when she would give back test papers, she always commented on the need to study harder. Yet by just listening, I could recall all the dates and names and battles and tribes that made up Roman History as told by Mrs. Fornocchio. I would retell the stories I had heard in class at the dinner table. To my amazement, everyone listened to the stories as I recounted them. Even Daddy seemed to be interested in these stories.

## 16

Shortly after the school year began, we prepare for our Confirmation. We were all issued new *Baltimore Catechisms*, and every day during Religion class, the nun came in and reviewed the assignment from the previous day. She stressed that the bishop, who would confirm us, might ask us a question about our faith. "You don't want to be the child who cannot answer his Eminence's question. He may refuse you Confirmation," she would threaten. I thought to myself that my life had been a big enough embarrassment to me without being humiliated in front of a thousand on looking students, family, and churchgoers. I planned to learn the Catechism backward and forward to avoid one more humiliation. A week before Confirmation, sister had all of us go to the front of the room to play a game. She would ask us questions out of the Catechism. If we answered correctly, we would remain standing. If we answered incorrectly, we had to sit down. There were some

twenty of us when we began. After a few questions half of the students were sent back to their chairs. I was asked to name the seven deadly sins. "Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth are the seven deadly sins," I said. I did not know what covetousness, lust, gluttony, or sloth meant, but I knew that they were on the list. I knew anger because it seemed that Daddy was angry about almost everything from my grades in school to cold meals at dinnertime. The nun said, with an inflection of surprise in her voice, "That is correct." She asked the next student a new question and kept going until there were only two of us left. The question was, "Name the Holy Days of Obligation." The other student left out All Saints Day. I repeated her list and added All Saints Day. Everyone in the class applauded. The little girl who missed the question went to her seat in tears. I felt like crying too because I was so shocked to have won the contest. All I did was read the Catechism. There were some questions that others had missed that I did not know the answer to, but those questions were answered before they got to me. Then Sister announced that she had a prize for the winner. She reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a Holy Card with the Sacred Heart of Jesus on it. I had been expecting candy, money, gum, or almost anything but not a card. The hardest part of the contest was acting like I cared about the prize. The next day sister repeated the exercise. This time I was excused from the contest. The winner of that contest won a Hershey bar.

Sergeant Gallardo asked Daddy to be his son's, Ronnie, sponsor for Confirmation. Daddy agreed. I asked Mommy to be my sponsor. She told me that a

parent could not be a sponsor, so I asked Sergeant Gallardo to be my sponsor, and he agreed. The day of Confirmation was October 17, 1957. It was an evening service. The church was brightly lit with candles and the smell of incense was everywhere. The bishop gave a sermon about the sacrament, and then he went to a special chair near the communion rail and sat down. Half dozen priests dressed like altar boys assisted him. Finally, the children in my row were told to rise and approach the altar. One by one we knelt before the bishop. He asked each of us what name we chose when we knelt down for his blessing. The nun had warned us that each of us would receive a slap on the face as a test of our faith. Mostly it looked like he just touched the cheek of each of us. The boy in front of me was asked a question and the Bishop stiffened at the answer, raised his head and smacked the kid hard enough that it could be heard throughout the church. I figured he gave a wrong answer. The boy rose from his knees and I was next. "What name have you chosen my child?" he asked. "I have chosen Bartholomew," I replied. Then he put some chrism, holy oil, on my forehead, made the sign of the cross, and it was over. I walked back to my pew and joined my classmates there. I listened to see if anyone else got slapped, but I did not hear the sound of a slap for the rest of the ceremony.

When the Confirmation was over, the Gallardos came over to our house for pie and coffee. Mommy had made cheesecake and pecan pie for the celebration. Mr. Gallardo brought me a Confirmation present, a Red Ryder cowboy book. The radio was playing music while we ate and talked. The program was interrupted by a news bulletin: "The Soviet Union has successfully launched a satellite into space, and it is

now orbiting the earth,” the announcer stated. Both Daddy and Sergeant Gallardo became visibly upset over this news and began to talk about our weak defense and the lack of a military and space policy. Except for the two dads, no one else in the room seemed to have any idea as to what the bulletin meant. The Gallardos left shortly after the news announcement.

On my bicycle, I followed our school bus route from Howard Street to St. Thomas Aquinas. The trip took less than fifteen minutes. Saturday mornings, I would ride to the church and serve as an altar boy for the 8:00am Mass. One Saturday, I heard some of the other boys talking about “the tunnels” under the church. They said that after Mass, they were going to go explore the tunnels. I asked if I could go with them. They were a completely enclosed network of spaces under the church. They were about three feet wide and about four feet high. We could not stand up in them. Mostly we walked on our hands and feet as we worked our way through the tunnels.

It was not long before I was inviting my friends to go exploring the tunnels. At lunchtime, we would disappear for the hour to eat our sandwiches in the candle lit atmosphere of the tunnels. We would use discarded altar candles to light our way. On one occasion, we heard another group of boys. We tried to find them, but we never did. On that trip, I hit my head on a pipe that ran just below the roof of the tunnel. I hit my head hard enough that I saw stars for the rest of the time we were down below.



The bus driver that day was a substitute, Mr. Parish. He was Dale Parish's dad, and he had found out about our trips into the tunnels. He told me he did not want his son to ever go down there again. He was wearing his mailman's uniform, and he looked very upset. I told him that his son was not the one that got knocked on the head. He replied again that he did not want Dale to go there ever again. He pinched my leg with his thumb and forefinger. It hurt. I told him I would not take him there any more. The next time we tried to go into the tunnels we discovered that the opening had been sealed with a padlock. That was the end of the tunnels for all of us. We heard rumors that some of the boys in the tunnels were drinking altar wine.

# 17

We lived on Howard street nearly a year when Mommy and Daddy announced that they were buying a house. It was not far from where we lived. It was a green two-story house that was very old. Mommy called it an Edwardian. It had four bedrooms, two baths, a basement that did not leak after every rain as ours on Howard Street did, and a garage in the back of the house. We only saw the house from the outside as Daddy would drive by it, but we knew it was a very fine old house. The day that Mommy and Daddy went to the realtor's to sign the papers for the house, the ROTC unit at Michigan State received Daddy's next set of orders. Mommy and Daddy were operating under the incorrect impression that once a soldier was stationed somewhere for five years it meant that the Pentagon would leave the soldier there until he retired. They had planned on "homesteading" in East Lansing and beginning their life after the Army there.

Someone from the ROTC Unit called the realtor's office and told Daddy the news. Mommy was in tears when they left the real estate agents office. We came home from school that day excited to hear about our new house, but Mommy was sad, and said she had bad news for us. "It looks like we are going to be stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for our next assignment, kids," she said wiping tears from her eyes. We all surrounded Mommy and gave her a long hard hug and told her many, many times that we loved her.

At dinner that night, Daddy brought out the *Encyclopedia Britannica* maps and showed us where in Missouri Fort Leonard Wood was located. He said he was told that it was often called a hellhole by its alumni who referred to it as “Fort Lost in the Woods.” Over the course of the next several weeks, Daddy met many soldiers who had been assigned there. None of them had anything good to say about the place.

For Christmas that year, I received a telegraph set. This was Daddy’s way of keeping me connected with Cub Scouts. I would call my friend, Dale Parish, and then tap letters out on my telegraph machine. I told Dale that I was getting a message from someone who had another telegraph machine, and we were sending each other secret messages. Dale could hear the telegraph making its familiar click, click, click sounds as it chirped the dots and dashed that made up the letters of the alphabet. He never called me a liar, but he was skeptical about this being true. Weeks later, I invited him over for the weekend. Finally, I had to confess that I was teasing him about the telegraph, but that I had one. Actually I had two. By connecting them with a long copper wire, I could send messages from one machine to the other. Brian would hide in our closet while I hid in the attic. We would send Morse code messages to each other with our telegraph devices. I showed Dale how this worked.

The next day when his mom came to get him, the first thing he told her was that I did not have a real telegraph connected to the telephone pole but a toy that my

brother and I played with. Mrs. Parish laughed and said while she was not sure if I did or did not have a telegraph, she could not figure out how a message could be sent to me over the telephone lines. She said she was delighted to meet a boy with such a vivid imagination. A few weeks later, I was invited to come over to Dale's house.

That Friday we walked from St. Thomas Aquinas to Dale's house. On the way Dale would step on the cracks in the concrete sidewalk and shout, "Step on a crack and break your mother's back."

I asked him why he would say that as I had heard it, "Step on a crack and break the devil's back."

"My mom's bossy and makes me do things I don't like," he said. I did not ask him further about this. They had a very large, beautiful, two-story Cape Cod house. It reminded me of Bobby Armbrust's house except it was larger and had a bigger yard with swings and toys to play with. At dinner that night, we had a sliced tomato salad before Mrs. Parish served us her tuna casserole. The tomatoes were sweet, and I did not like them, so I pushed them aside. When I did this, Mrs. Parish laughed and said that her family had a problem with the acid in tomatoes. The only way she could get them to eat tomatoes was if she sweetened them. I told her that we did not eat tomatoes with sugar at our house. We put salt on ours. I did eat all the tuna casserole that she served me. It was very good. I noticed that all her children liked this meal. I asked her about eating fish on Friday and told her I did not like fish. She

said her family loved fish especially fresh fish. "If you ever had really fresh fish, you might change your mind about not liking fish," she said.

We started to talk about school. I told Mrs. Parish I did not like school very much. She wanted to know what subject I liked the best. I told her, "Religion."

"What subject do you not like," she asked.

"Arithmetic," I told her. She chuckled.

Dale asked me, "How much is twenty times twenty?" I thought about it for a few seconds, and said that I did not know. He smiled a funny smile at his mother.

I asked him, "How much is twenty times twenty?"

He said, "Four hundred." I looked at his mom and asked if that was right.

"Yes, it is," she said.

I asked Dale how he knew the answer so easily, and he said, "Twenty times twenty is really only two times two. You just need to remember to multiply four by ten two times." Once he said that, it was like a door in my mind opened. Arithmetic was not hard once you knew what you were trying to do. I asked him, "How much is 30 times 30?"

He said, "Nine hundred." Then I explained the steps to him as to how he got the answer. "That's right," he said. My grades in arithmetic did not improve much, but the insight I gained that night helped me to understand that the world was knowable even if it operated differently than my family operated.

The next morning after breakfast, Dale and I found a big stick in the front yard. It was probably a limb that fell from a tree during a recent windstorm. When

we saw it, we both said it looked like a giant snake. We picked it up and pretended to do a snake dance with it as we headed back into his house to watch cartoons. When we reached the steps to the porch, I felt a sudden pain in my mouth. It seemed that Dale who was behind me had let go of his end of the snake stick as we began to climb the stairs to his house. My end of the stick rose and hit my left, upper incisor and broke it. Almost at that moment, Mommy pulled into the Parish's driveway. I was in tears as well as pain from the broken tooth. Mommy took me to the dentist's office, and he capped the tooth.

The problem with capped teeth and young boys is that caps come off. While I was eating lunch a few weeks later, the cap fell off, and I swallowed it. I did not tell my parents. Daddy said that the dentist had charged him a fortune for the dental work, and I was afraid that he would get really upset with me if I told him I swallowed the cap. The next day I went into the bathroom and did my business, but instead of flushing, I squished my way through that bowel movement inch by inch in search of the swallowed temporary cap. I did not find it. I washed my hands with Ajax, soap, and laundry detergent and still imagined that they smelled like a sour sewer. That afternoon, I confessed to Mommy that I had swallowed the cap and how I had tried to find it. Mommy replied, "You're lucky you didn't find it. You would have gotten ill if you tried to wear that again. We will just get you another cap; maybe a permanent one this time.

Toward the end of the school year, Daddy began to tell people at church that we were moving to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

On the last day of fifth grade, Mrs. Fornocchio told four of us boys to remain in the classroom. After everyone else was gone, she told us that we were being passed conditionally to the sixth grade. "Your report card says that you have been promoted to sixth grade, but I have stapled a piece of paper to your report card that states that this is a conditional pass. Each of you will be required to complete a number of homework assignments. Periodically, you will have to turn in these completed assignments. Then we will remove the conditional pass." On her desk, she had four shopping bags full of books and on top of the bags there were mimeographed work sheets that we were to complete by the end of the summer. "When you pick up your bags, you can leave. Have a nice summer," she said.

I knew that my life was over. Daddy would kill me as soon as he saw my report card. Rather than walking out the front door of the school, I walked down to the church entrance and looked out into the parking lot. At the far end of the parking lot, I saw our green Plymouth. Mommy was in the driver seat! That meant that Daddy did not come to school to get us. As I looked out at our car, I noticed that there was a garbage can at the end of the sidewalk leading into the church entrance where I was standing. I took the report card and carefully removed the staple that fastened the note from Mrs. Fornocchio. Under the note the report card said, "Promoted to Sixth Grade." I tore the note into snowflake size scraps of paper and put them in my pocket. I could tell that Mommy was not looking in the direction that would be coming from. I slowly walked out of the church entrance and went to the garbage can. I pushed open the lid and slid all of my books, maybe ten in all, into

the garbage can. Then I walked back into the church and retraced my route to my classroom. Then I walked out the school entrance. I kept looking to see what Mommy's reaction might be, but she was talking to Mrs. Gallardo and had not noticed me at all. When I got to the car I shouted "School's out Schools out. No more pencils, no more books, no more teacher's dirty looks." Neither she nor Mrs. Gallardo heard me. I opened the car door and got in. "Hi, Mommy," I said. "Hi, honey," she said as she continued to talk to Mrs. Gallardo. Not long after this, a haggard Ronnie Gallardo came limping up to our car carrying his bag of summer books and wearing a glum look on his face.



## Part II

Fort Leonard Wood

### 18

When Daddy accepted the rate of Master Sergeant after surrendering his rank of Captain, Master Sergeant or E-7 was the highest rate enlisted Army personnel could achieve. Unlike Second Lieutenants who would spend a career in a slow climb to Lieutenant Colonel-twenty or more years-Daddy took the short cut to the top when he accepted the Army's offer to return as a Master Sergeant in late 1947. It had to have pained him to have to leave the officer corps, but he seemed to relish being the biggest fish in the enlisted end of the pond as an E-7. After listening to Mrs. Fornocchio's stories about Rome, I began to see Daddy differently. I saw him as a Centurion in Caesar's army or a Tribune who represented the plebian causes. Enlisted personnel made up 90 percent of the Army, and Daddy always acted like he was the boss.

In June 1958, the Army added two new rates to its enlisted rate structure, E-8 and E-9. While Daddy accepted orders from the officers as a part of his role in the Army, he levitated with silent rage when given orders by his peers or worse by people he pegged as intellectually lower than himself. Daddy said that he had an IQ

of 180. Among the enlisted rates as he saw it, he had no equals. Nightly at the dinner table, he made it clear that he had no peers in his family either.

When he went off to summer camp in June 1958, Daddy took a small mountain of Army manuals on maintenance and management with him. He spent most of his free time studying these manuals. Later he would tell us that he knew more about the engines of a duce and a half, an army truck that could carry two and a half tons of cargo, than the President of General Motors. If Daddy passed the test he said it would change his life and the fortunes of his family. As Daddy left for summer camp, I could not help but notice how close in size his pile of books was to those that I had tossed in the garbage can at Saint Thomas Aquinas on the last day of school.

On the first Monday of my summer vacation, Mommy sat down with me and explained that she and Daddy thought I needed to become a better reader in order to improve in school. Then she handed me the *Red Ryder* novel I had received from Mr. Gallardo as a Confirmation gift. "I want you to read ten pages a day in this book. You don't have to read on Saturdays or Sundays, but you must promise me that you will read on all the other days," she said peering at me through her glasses that had now slid half-way down her nose. Her eyes were so kind and gentle that I could not say anything but "Yes."

We agreed that every afternoon at two o'clock I would go to my bedroom and read ten pages. At first, I found I could barely read a page before dropping off into a deep slumber, but Mommy kept coming into the room asking me what was going on

in the story. By the time I reached page sixty, I began to realize that the novel told a very long story much like what I would see on TV or at the movies. By page one hundred, Mommy did not need to send me to my bedroom to read because when lunch was over, I was off to read. For the first time in my life, I found within the cover of a book adventure, a good story, bad guys, and of course a good guy, the Red Ryder. As I approached the end of the novel, I stopped reading ten pages a day. Now, each page had become like a lick of an ice cream cone. I wanted the experience to last. I wanted this book to never come to an end. Mid-summer arrived and I finished my book. I felt a great sense of accomplishment having read an entire book. I felt more grown up. I began to wonder what else I might find to read.

While Daddy was at summer camp, his *Time Magazine* subscription began to pile up in the living room, so I began to read them. There were parts of the magazine that did not appeal to me, but the sections on science, movies, and milestones had great appeal. I also began to follow the features on world events. What surprised me about the magazine was that it was so much more fun to read than any school reader I had ever encountered. I was convinced that if Mommy had given me my fifth-grade reader as my summer reading assignment, I would have slept the entire summer, probably never progressing beyond the first page.

The note that I had detached from my report card in June was buried deep in my memory. It was so deeply buried that I had not thought about it all summer until late on Labor Day after Daddy came back from summer camp. He and Sergeant Gallardo had become good friends while working with the ROTC cadets that

summer. Shortly after Daddy came home, the Gallardo family came over for a Labor Day picnic. We had hamburgers, baked beans and potato salad. The adults and Jeannie stayed inside and talked. Brian, Raymond, Ronnie, and I played outside. We were playing with some of Raymond's toy, green, plastic, army soldiers. We had piled up rocks, twigs, and dirt and had made a fort. We were preparing for the final assault when Mrs. Gallardo called for Ronnie and Raymond to join her at our house. She ended her call with, "Ronnie, you have to do your homework when we get home."

I asked Ronnie what homework he had to do. "Mrs. Fornocchio gave me a bunch of books to read and a list of home work assignments to complete, otherwise I will have to repeat fifth grade," he said.

"How did your dad feel about this when he found out?"

"He just told me I had to do what I had to do if I wanted to pass to sixth grade, so I am doing the work every day. It only takes a couple of hours to do; it's not too bad. Most days I do all the work before lunch, and then I can play the rest of the day."

"How many kids are doing this," I asked waiting to hear my name.

"I don't know. I know there are others because my mother gets a report on my progress, and they tell her I am doing better than most of the other students," he added.

Prior to Mrs. Gallardo calling her sons, I had been hot and sweaty from building the fort for our Army men and running about in the backyard. As we

approached our house, I felt my blood turn to ice. My fingers had grown cold; I was now in a cold sweat. I expected as soon as the Gallardos left that Daddy would ask me about my report card, but that never happened. I did ask Mommy why Ronnie had to leave, and she told me he was working on homework so he could start sixth grade. I said nothing else, as I waited to hear my mother say something about the other students who were also doing extra work, but again, she said nothing further on the subject.

As Labor Day's sun set, a kind of desperation about the coming day began growing within me. What would I encounter at school the next day.

The next morning at six o'clock, Daddy flicked our bedroom lights on and off three times and said, "You have five minutes to get dressed and be down stairs for breakfast." Years of this kind of behavior by Daddy had conditioned us, like trained dogs, to leap out of bed, dress, make our beds, and charge down the stairs from our second floor bedroom, each of us, Brian and I, trying to be the first at the table so Daddy would heap praise on the winner. Usually he responded with, "What took so long?"

Jeannie's bedroom was on the first floor. She was always at the table when Brian and I arrived. Daddy would bring us heaping bowls of steaming oatmeal. There was sugar, margarine, and milk to add flavor to what had become our breakfast fare over the past six years. I would stir my oatmeal for several minutes to reduce its temperature to below molten. I would add a dollop of margarine, and several teaspoons of sugar, and then mix. Once the margarine was melted and the

sugar had dissolved, I added the icy cold milk. As the milk settled on top of the oatmeal, I could see small sheets of margarine beginning to congeal on the surface. With the exception of the milk that I added to my oatmeal breakfast, I knew that the ingredients in my bowl were almost identical to the ingredients of the oatmeal cookies Mommy often made. In silence, I wondered why we could not have oatmeal cookies and a glass of milk for breakfast, but such thoughts were not permitted to be spoken in our house-Daddy viewed all criticism as subversive, and he had special ways of dealing with subversives. Mommy often said, "Silence is golden."

Once the margarine congealed like a tiny ice cap on a small pond, I then stirred the bowl's contents until everything in it took on a grayish shade. Then I would begin to spoon heaping glops of my concoction into my mouth. By sixth grade, I had gotten very good at estimating the amount of milk needed to achieve the correct temperature in the bowl while at the same time creating out of liquids a semisolid gruel that would allow me to scoop most of the bowl's contents into my mouth with only a half dozen visits from my spoon. I was always careful not to let Daddy see me as I shoveled in my oatmeal, but I found that eating oatmeal this way allowed me to eat it quickly while avoiding tasting it. Whenever Daddy asked how breakfast was, I always answered, "Mmmmm good."

Daddy drove us to school. As we neared St. Thomas Aquinas, I began to worry about what the nuns would say when I showed up and had not done any of the work I was supposed to do during my summer vacation. My heart raced, and my palms became moist. When we got out of the car, I walked to the school building.

Brian was eager to meet with his classmates, and he almost ran up the sidewalk to the front door.

I went to the sixth grade classroom and took a seat and waited. The school bell rang, and the nun came into the room and took roll. At the end of roll call, I raised my hand saying, "Sister, you did not call my name."

"I called all the names on my class roster. Are you sure I did not call you name," she said.

"You didn't call Timmy Heath. That's me," I said.

"You will need to go to the office, but let me write you a note." She scribbled something on a piece of paper and folded it. She handed it to me saying, "Once they have this straightened out, come immediately back to class. Now go."

I walked to the office, a corner room near the entrance to the school. To my surprise, my brother walked in right after I did. The school secretary sat at a desk behind the counter. She asked me why I was there, and I told her that my name was not on the roll sheet. Brian added, "Mine wasn't either."

"Who are you?" the secretary boomed.

"I'm Timmy Heath, and this is my brother, Brian Heath."

"Wait here." The secretary disappeared into a room behind her desk. From inside the room I heard a voice say, "The Heaths are here?" Then Sister Subina, the Principal, came out of the office followed by the secretary. She wore glasses that were so thick that her eyes were magnified by them. They looked twice the size of normal eyes. Now those huge eyes, icy blue, glared at us. She stood there looking at

me for a few seconds as if thinking about something, and finally said, "We were told that your father was being transferred to Missouri. Is this not true?"

"Daddy is transferring to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri," Brian said adding, "but we will be here for the first two weeks of school, and Daddy wanted us to go to school here before we left for Missouri."

"Well, I fully support your father's desire to have you educated, but we did not know you would be attending this year. Come with me." Then Sister Subina came out from behind the secretary's counter and placed her hands on our backs and gently pushed us through the office door. "Let me have a moment with each of your teachers, and we will have this fixed." She stopped first at my classroom, rapping on the pane of glass in the door with the sound of authority. Almost instantly, the nun inside greeted Sister Subina.

"Please add Timmy Heath to your roll sheet and assign him a seat in your class. I will speak with his father later today about this. Turning to me she said, "Timmy take your seat in the sixth grade. I will take care of your brother now." The nun opened the door to the classroom, and I walked in and retook my seat. Ronnie Gallardo sat across from me on the right. I felt truly sad for Ronnie and his ruined summer, but the giddy delight that coursed through my body wanted to scream, "I got away with it."



# 19

Friday of the second week of class, Mommy came to school to get us. We met her in the school office. She was talking with Sister Subina. In her hands she held our school records from Saint Thomas Aquinas. Sister Subina wished us success in our new school, and ended with, "You are always welcome back here anytime." She gave us a hug as we left.

A familiar scene awaited us when we arrived home. In front of our house, a Mayflower moving van had taken up residence, and a small army of men marched in and out of the house. Brian and I hopped out of the car and ran into the house. Curtains and rugs were gone and no furniture remained in the house. Upstairs in our room, the bunk beds were gone, dresser removed, and the walk in closet was empty. All that remained in our room were two suitcases. We opened them to find them stuffed with underwear, socks, shirts and slacks. Then we heard Daddy's voice. We quietly walked down the stairs to see Daddy entering the house with a suitcase. He wore a sports jacket, open collar shirt, and slacks. His shoes were very shiny. He gave Mommy a hug, then asked, "How far along are we?"

Mommy replied that the movers would be gone shortly.

"Good," he replied, "I think we can make it to your sister's in Chicago in less than four hours if we leave soon."

"I will get the kids to load up the car," Mommy said.

Brian and I carried our suitcases down to the car and placed them in the trunk. Daddy came out to make sure that everything was loaded. He and Mommy went into the house once more. The owner of the house accompanied them. Later when they walked out from inside the house, I heard the owner say, "It's been a pleasure having you here. The house just looks beautiful." Mommy had a big smile on her face and was holding a check in her hand. As Daddy backed the car out of the driveway, Mommy said "Good-bye old house. You did well for us." We all joined her in saying good-bye to the drafty house, with the basement that flooded, and whose old bones creaked every time a gust of wind stirred up. I sat in the middle of the rear seat with the hump under my feet. All I wanted was the chance to start fresh somewhere. Brian and Jeannie had done well in school and other endeavors, while I had lagged behind. I hoped that the place called Missouri would be different from the place called Michigan.

Two hours into the trip, Mommy suggested that Daddy stop so we could eat, as she was hungry. "I'm sure the kids are famished too." Daddy said he would stop just before the Indiana border and get us some food. I began to envision hamburgers, and sodas, and cookies. True to his word, Daddy pulled off the road in a tiny, nameless town just before the Indiana border. "I'll be right back," he said after he set the emergency brake. A few minutes later, Daddy came out of the store with a brown paper bag in his hand. When he got into the car, he handed Mommy the bag and said, "Here, fix them sandwiches." Mommy pulled out a loaf of Wonder Bread, and opened the container of bologna Daddy bought. She placed a couple of

pieces on a slice of bread and then asked, "Who wants miracle whip on theirs?"

Brian asked what we would drink, and Daddy said, "You can drink water when you get to your Aunts Margie's. Now shut up and eat." As he backed the car out of the parking lot, Mommy handed Daddy the first sandwich. He took it with his right hand and drove with his left hand. Before we had gone a mile he had consumed the entire sandwich. One by one, Mommy handed each of us a sandwich as she made them. When we all had a sandwich, Mommy said, "We will have a big meal when we get to Missouri. Won't that be fun kids?" We all agreed with Mommy, and after that, we ate in silence.

The further into our trip we went the darker it became. Soon all the oncoming traffic had their headlights on, and by the time we arrived at Aunt Margie's, night had set in on the road and in the car. The dashboard instruments, the occasional red glow emitted by Mommy and Daddy's cigarettes, and the headlights of oncoming cars were the only sources of light inside our car as it arrived at its destination.

Aunt Margie and her husband, Uncle Johnnie, greeted us when we arrived. Uncle Johnnie was Polish and spoke English with a strange accent. He was slightly taller than Daddy, and he had a voice and warm personality that boomed out of his body. He gave each of us a bear hug. Then he called his dog, Thunder, except he said it more like "Tunda." Thunder was a German shepherd. He must have weighed eighty pounds. His coloring was different from Rin-Tin-Tin of TV show fame. He was mostly black and this gave him a menacing appearance.

Aunt Margie's told us she had fried chicken for our dinner. Instantly, we all looked toward Daddy. Meat was forbidden on Friday's in the Heath house. Daddy said, "It's Okay, we're guests." For dessert, she had made New York cheesecake. The chicken was delicious, made even more so by the fact that we were eating it on Friday. Getting us to eat the cheesecake was a bit tricky for Aunt Margie. "Why do they call it cheesecake if it is not cheese?" I asked, recalling that the only cheese I had eaten up to this point in my life was Kraft's Velveeta cheese. Aunt Margie reasoned with us, "It's called cheese cake because it is made with cream cheese. Then you add sugar and other flavorings to that and bake it in the oven. The crust is made of graham crackers, butter, and sugar. If you tried just a little bit, you would love it." She put a small amount on a fork and handed it to me. I put it in my mouth expecting it to taste like sweetened Velveeta. As the morsel began to dissolve on my tongue, I realized not even chocolate tasted that good. It was a perfect mix of sweet and sour, crunchy and smooth. "May I have a bigger piece," I said handing my plate to Aunt Margie.

The next morning, we left Chicago before the sun rose. Daddy wanted to stop in Ottawa to see his parents before we continued on to Fort Leonard Wood. It was dark when we got into the car. Everyone slept until Daddy said, "We're here. Everyone up and out." It was bright and sunny. Daddy had stopped along the way and bought a basket of vine-ripened tomatoes before calling on his family. Grandma greeted us at the door and gave all of us very hearty hugs. Mommy and Daddy went into the living room to talk with Grandma and Grandpa. Jeannie, Brian, and I stayed

in the kitchen. Grandma had put out a loaf of cinnamon bread and a stick of real butter and told us to enjoy ourselves. We had not had breakfast yet, so we toasted the cinnamon bread and then slathered it with generous helpings of sweet butter. By the time Grandma came back into the kitchen, the three of us had eaten every piece of bread and all the butter. I thought Grandma was going to be angry with us, but instead she gave the three of us a hug and told us she was happy we ate all the bread, and that she wished she had more for us to eat. She got out a quart of milk and some glasses and poured us milk to wash down our toast.

Brian and I went into the backyard. It backed up to a railroad track that ran behind their house. In the past we had gone down to the track and put stones on the rails and waited for the train to come along and crush the stones. We were headed to the tracks to do just that when Mommy called to us. "Boys, Daddy said we need to be getting a move on if we are going to make it to Fort Leonard Wood today." Glumly, we walked back to the car. After hugs and kisses, we got back into the car and headed west toward Fort Leonard Wood.

Around three in the afternoon we saw a sign that pointed the way to Fort Leonard Wood, but Daddy kept going on Route 66. After a while Mommy said, that was the road to Fort Leonard Wood, but we are going on Lebanon. It is only about 40 miles down Route 66 from the fort. Daddy said there was no housing available at Fort Leonard Wood, and that Lebanon seemed like a nice little town to live in. An hour later we pulled into the Munger Moss motel. "Wait here while I get the keys," said Daddy. When Daddy returned, he told us which rooms we would be in. Jeannie,

Brian, and I would have one room, and Mommy and Daddy would have another. We hauled our suitcases into our rooms and began to unpack. Mommy and Daddy went to the grocery store for food. That night we again feasted on fried chicken, baked potatoes and a tomato salad. The next day we went to Sunday Mass at the local Catholic Church, St. Francis DeSales. Near the church there was an old red brick building that was the school. That night as we prepared for bed, Mommy came to our room. She told us that we needed to be up early the next day so Daddy could take us to school. Brian and I would be starting at Saint Francis, and Jeannie would be going to Lebanon High School. Mommy said Daddy would be leaving at 7:30 in the morning.

The next day began with a knock on the door. "You up yet? You dressed? Your mother's making breakfast, so get a move on." We rolled out of unfamiliar beds in which we had not slept well and began to prepare ourselves for our first day at our new school. When we arrived at St. Francis, we met the principal, Sister Luke, a tiny woman who looked like she was a hundred years old. Her skin was whiter than a cloud, and she was stooped over. She took us down the hall to our classroom. Brian and I were puzzled by the fact that she took us to the same classroom. Sister Luke knocked on the door, and a tall, young looking nun, Sister Matthew, opened the door. "Sister Matthew, these are your new students. Timmy and Brian Heath. They will be joining your fifth/sixth grade class. Please seat them and see that they have their books by the end of the day." Then Sister Luke left us and went to another classroom where she would begin her teaching day. Sister Matthew introduced us

to the class and then assigned us to our seats. This was the first time since second semester of first grade that I had been a new student, and I felt all the eyeballs in the classroom looking at me. There were about twenty students in the sixth grade, and the same number in the fifth grade.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the school bell rang, and Sister Matthew told the students to be back in twenty minutes when recess was over. Already, I liked St. Francis much more than St. Thomas Aquinas. We had a lunch period at STA, but no recess. At STA there were hundreds of students in the school and ninth graders ruled the school, but at St. Francis, eighth graders were the top students. The entire school did not have more than 160 students. Unlike STA with its many classrooms, there were only four rooms at St. Francis. All classes were double classes at St. Francis, but they did have a library. There was a baseball field across the street from the school and a large field where the kids in my class played a game called dare-base. In the basement of the school, there was a small cafeteria, and on my first day, I ate my lunch in the cafeteria. The food was good.

After school on that first day, Daddy picked us up and took us to the motel. At dinner that night, we learned that Mommy and Daddy had found a four-bedroom house not far from the school. Once our furniture arrived from East Lansing, we would move in to our new home. The movers arrived on Saturday, and in a couple of hours they had unloaded all of our belongings. Mommy hung curtains and Daddy painted rooms. Jeannie had her own room on the first floor. The spare bedroom became a storage room. It too was on the first floor, but Mommy and Daddy had

plans for a freezer and they would keep it in this room. To encourage our studies, Daddy bought an old door and with the help of some two-by-fours, he turned the door into a desk. The spare bedroom became our study room.

The following Monday morning, Jeannie waited at the bus stop to go to school, and Mommy walked Brian and me to St. Francis. It was about ten minutes away on foot. Mommy had made us our lunches. As soon as lunch was over, the children were allowed to go out to the playing fields. To play on the ball field you had to have a baseball glove. I did not have one, so I wandered over to where they were playing dare-base. In this game, the object was to capture an opposing player by touching him or her. The player who left his goal last “had power over” a player who left his goal earlier than the other player. It took a few days for me to understand this rule, but once I did, I began to capture players on the opposing team very quickly. One very nice feature of the game was the ability to rescue a player on my team who had been captured. To do this, it was necessary to cross the other team’s goal line without being touched. When I figured this out, I became an even better dare-base player. I would wait behind my goal until the other team had depleted its strength by sending out its players to capture players on my team. Once there were only three or four players defending the other team’s goal, I would charge out as if headed toward a player from the other team, then I would make a frenzied charge toward the opposing goal line. I had always been a fast runner, but now my speed had a usefulness, and it made me friends, at least while we were on the playground. Many of the students in my class were also Army brats. In the



combined fifth/sixth grade at least half of the students were brats. It was the first time as a brat that I began to understand the difference between enlisted and officer. The natural first question when meeting another brat for the first time was, "What does your dad do?" Once that was clarified, the next question was what is his rank. One thing I noticed about the officer children was that they had nicer clothes than the enlisted children. One of these children, Raymond, and I became friendly during the 1958 World Series. He had blond hair and blue eyes and was from Wisconsin. The Yankees were playing the Braves in the World Series and had lost the previous series to the Braves. This was a rematch. He said the Braves would win this one too. I told him I thought the Yankees would win. He bet me a dime. To me a dime was a fortune, but I felt I could not back down, so I took the bet. After the fourth game of the series, the Braves held an almost insurmountable three games to one lead. I lost interest in the series, as it appeared that the Yankees were sure to lose. But the Yankees won and Raymond brought me a dime. When he handed it to me, I asked what it was for. He said, "The Yankees won the series and you won the bet." I had totally forgotten about the series and the bet until Raymond gave me the dime. I was ashamed of myself. I had taken the bet only to save face. I had not followed the games after a Yankee loss was all but assured. I thanked him, kept the dime, and suggested we bet on the next season's series.

As the school year progressed at St. Francis, I felt much better about myself, but my grades barely improved. I made B's in spelling, religion, and history, but in arithmetic and English I was a low C even a D student. Just as had happened at Saint

Thomas Aquinas, after each report card I had a session with Mr. Belt. Usually Daddy stopped at four swats on my bare butt, but once I received six swats. I cried while I was being spanked, but once it was over, I let my feelings about it pass as if it were nothing more than a hard sneeze.

## 20

In the spring of 1959, Daddy was considered for an honor called "Soldier of the Month." To become Soldier of the Month, a soldier faced a long and difficult competition. Every organization on the post had a candidate that they wanted to achieve this august honor. When we came home from school one day, Mommy said that Daddy was going to be on TV. She said that the local TV station was interviewing the three finalists for Soldier of the Month. We turned the TV on at 4:30 in the afternoon to watch Daddy. All three soldiers seemed very impressive, but Daddy did seem to answer the questions of the host much better than the others. He also looked the sharpest of the three. We all wanted Daddy to win, not because he was our Daddy, but because we really believed he was the best person for the honor. The winner was announced later in the day, but not on TV. When Daddy came home that night, he showed us the certificate stating that he was the Soldier of the Month at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The best was still to be announced.

At dinner that night, Daddy told us that the following weekend we were going to go to St. Louis to celebrate. "The winner gets two nights at the Statler

Hilton Hotel all expenses paid. We will be staying in a suite, and the Army will cover all of our meals and gratuities. We also get a tour of the city." When Daddy told us this, everyone was as excited as if Christmas was going to happen the next weekend.

The next Friday, Daddy came to get us from school at noon. We drove to St. Louis and checked in to the hotel. The hotel had placed a large plastic wrapped fruit basket in our suite, and after we put our suitcases away, Daddy sat down in a big brown leather chair by the window and opened the basket. He pulled out a fig and began to eat it. Then he winced in pain and held his hand to his mouth. Mommy asked what was the matter, and Daddy answered, "I think I cracked a goddam tooth." He spit out bits of fig and along with it came part of a tooth. Daddy went to the bathroom and took some aspirin and lay down. Mommy told us to be very quiet. We were.

It was about seven o'clock when Daddy got up. He took more aspirin, and said he was feeling better. He told us all to get dressed for dinner. Mommy wore a new dress that Daddy bought her for the trip. He also bought her a matching hat. The hat had netting in front, but Mommy did not wear the netting down over her face. She looked very pretty in her dress and hat. Brian and I wore white shirts with real ties. We tied Windsor knots with our ties. Jeannie wore the dress she had worn at her graduation from ninth grade and looked very grown up in it.

We took the elevator to the restaurant. At the restaurant entrance there was a maître de. He asked if we had reservations, and Daddy said we did. He also showed the man a letter from the Army. This caused a commotion and he called a

manager from the hotel. The manager said that Daddy was the Soldier of the Month and that anything we wanted would be billed to the Army. After that, the maître de became much more friendly to Daddy and took us to our table. Once we were seated, we began to read the menu. I saw pork chops, lamb chops, porterhouse steaks all listed on the menu. I thought for sure that because of the honor that we were celebrating we would be eating meat. After all we were exempt from the no meat on Friday rule, but when the waiter began to discuss the specials of the day, he mentioned that there was red snapper at the smorgasbord table. Daddy said we would have the red snapper for our main course. On hearing Daddy's words, I felt like I had just had my heart ripped from my chest. I wanted to scream I was so disappointed by Daddy's decision. I thought, what's the point. If I wanted fish, I could get it out of a tuna can, but this was a big deal, an honor, and we are eating fish! Just like God, Daddy did a lot of strange things that no one could understand. Discussion of the point would only bring out Daddy's wrath.

We followed Daddy to the table. There was a very large fish on a silvery round platter. The fish had been cut into tiny pieces that could be conveniently picked up with tongs. The fish did not look red. It looked like every fish I had ever seen. It looked fish colored. I took a few pieces of the fish to make Daddy happy. Lemon wedges wreathed the edge of the fish platter. I took some of those too. In a large bowl next to the fish was tartar sauce. I took some of that. I ate in silence, chewing slowly and pretending that each bite of fish was the steak I really wanted and that we could have had. I did not hear any of the conversation at the table that

night until the waiter said, "Will there be any dessert tonight?" Dessert at home generally consisted of either Libby's Fruit Cocktail or Jell-O. Daddy asked the waiter what was available for dessert. "Banana Split, pie, chocolate cake," and the list went on. Daddy then said, "What do you kids want?" Without hesitation I asked, "Do you have chocolate malts?" The waiter said they did. I asked for a chocolate malt with extra malt and a Banana split. Brian said he wanted the same thing, but he wanted a strawberry malt. Jeannie asked for a piece of New York Cheese Cake.

For the next half hour, I was in dessert heaven savoring every drop of my malt and bite of my Banana Split. I had never had a banana split, but I had heard so much about them that I had to try one. As I finished off the last of my dessert, I thought that a fish dinner was a small price to pay for such a wonderful dessert. As we neared the bottom of our malts, Brian and I got into a contest over who could make the loudest slurping sound with a straw, that is until Daddy said, "One more noise like that, and you will get no dessert tomorrow night."

The next day we took a bus tour of the city. The tour guide pointed out many important landmarks. We saw a garden called the Jewel Box, the first cathedral in Saint Louis, the Eads Bridge, Busch Stadium, and a place where Mark Twain lived. We stopped at a museum that had Sitting Bull's clothes on display. For dinner that night Daddy told Brian and me to order Prime Rib. I had never heard of this before, and given Daddy's penchant for making bad food selections when good food was available, I had my concerns. My concern about dinner that night ended when the waiter placed my plate in front of me. On it was a piece of meat that nearly filled the

plate. It was rare and had something called “au jus” on top of it. The first slice that I had of prime rib has never been equaled in taste or tenderness by any other meat I have eaten since. I could not believe that Daddy could have made such a good choice. I ate the prime rib with some horseradish. That night as I ate, I was never sure if my tears were those of joy over the fine dinner I ate, or pain from the intensity of the horseradish.

The next morning Daddy woke us up at five thirty so that we could go to a six o'clock Mass. It was Palm Sunday. We walked a couple of blocks to a retirement home for priests. It also served as a church on Sunday. There were pews and an altar inside the home. An old priest said Mass while other old priests acted as altar boys. When mass was over, we went back to the hotel and had breakfast. I finished off my bacon and eggs breakfast with another chocolate malt and banana split with extra chocolate sauce. Having overdosed on sugar and chocolate, I slept all the way home as did Jeannie and Brian who also indulged themselves on ice cream, malts, and New York cheesecake.

At home that night at dinner, I noticed for the first time that we were using paper napkins, our plates were chipped or cracked, and our dining utensils did not match. Some of our forks and spoons were stamped USA or USN surplus. We did not have a tablecloth. Only hours earlier, I had been seated at a cheery table at the Statler Hilton. I began to feel depressed, and then realized that I was not so much depressed as I was disappointed with the life my family lived, and I wondered why that was. For survival, I wondered in silence. The next night, I folded the paper

napkins like our cloth napkins were folded at the Statler. Daddy and Brian made fun of me. I told them, "That's how the napkins looked at the hotel." Daddy said, "We're not at the hotel. You don't need to fold the napkins any more." I sulked in silence just like I had the night we ate red snapper but could have had steak.

The following Saturday was Holy Saturday. Generally we went to Mass every Saturday at seven o'clock, and again the following morning at eight. Before Saturday evening Mass, we hurriedly ate our dinner while Daddy pointed out to us all of our faults, "Chew with your mouth closed. Don't cut your meat with a fork; use a knife. Get your elbow off the table." After dinner that evening, we were to dress for Mass, but I told Mommy that I did not feel well because I had a stomachache. I stayed home. I was in bed when they came home, but while they attended the Saturday evening Mass, I played with some toy ships that Brian had gotten for Christmas. I relived the entire Second World War at sea during the hours that everyone else was at church. Though I had lied about the stomachache, I did not feel guilty about the lie. I did not feel badly about missing Mass. A new sensation entered my mind. I called it joy. The next morning while everyone else went to the 8:00am Easter Sunday Mass, I stayed in bed.

I heard the car pull into our driveway that was actually a well-worn rut in the Missouri soil. Daddy had a habit of jerking on the emergency brake really hard when he was upset about something. This day the jerking sound was so intense I was sure he had pulled the emergency brake out of the floor as he applied it. When

Daddy came into the house, I heard him yelling at Mommy, "Go up there and tell him I want to see him now!"

Mommy slowly ascended the steps. She came into the bedroom, and asked how I was feeling. "Better," I told her.

"Well, Daddy wants you to come downstairs," she said. Mommy left, and I put on my bathrobe and went down stairs. Daddy was standing in the middle of the living room when I arrived.

"Just what do you think you are up to?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

I said, "Nothing. I don't feel well."

Daddy asked me where I did not feel well. I pointed to my stomach. "Mayme get in here," Daddy yelled. Mommy had returned to the kitchen where she was making breakfast, so when she came into the living room she had on an apron, a lit cigarette in her mouth, and held a spatula in her right hand. "Make an appointment with the doctors at the fort."

"Yes, dear, I will call tomorrow," she said. "Now I have to finish breakfast."

Daddy shot, "This one gets bullion and nothing else today." Mommy went back into the kitchen. Then Daddy started to tell me about all the suffering that Jesus went through before he was crucified as if I were the sole cause of all human suffering. "He was scourged and made to carry a heavy cross, and then he was crucified. And you can't even go to Mass on Easter to give thanks for Jesus. You make me sick. Get out of my sight." I turned and fled up the stairs. When I got to my bed, I was actually giddy with delight. I did enjoy some aspects of my religion. I



enjoyed being an altar boy. I just could not tolerate the never-ending presence of religion in my life. First it was the fish on Friday in Saint Louis; now, it was going to Mass twice in twelve hours. I could not see the point. I did not know how to say this to my father and thought it best that I did not say this to him. I had won. I had won and did not even get a spanking out of it! All I did was resist as best I could. In Daddy's world, all that mattered was form. His happy family went to church together whenever he said it was time to go to church. We were a good happy Catholic family. Sick or not, what Daddy saw was that I did not blindly submit to his will.

That afternoon the Finns came over to see us. Their children went to St. Francis too. Patsy, the oldest daughter, had heard I was not well, and she wanted to see me to make sure I was all right. The Finns stayed for several hours. Patsy even brought a board game that Jeannie, Brian, and I played with her. I could tell from how my brother and sister behaved that they felt like they were doing something wrong. They were not obeying Daddy. They were playing with me, and Daddy said I made him sick. As the game went on, I talked louder and louder, and felt more and more bold about not going to church. Then I realized that the Finns would leave soon, and I would be alone with Daddy. I told Patsy that I appreciated her visit, but that I was starting to feel badly again and went upstairs to my room. While the Finns were at our house, Daddy spent much of the time in the kitchen pretending to cook Easter dinner. After the Finns went home, Daddy talked very badly about Mr.

Finn and his drinking and the fact that his wife had to work, so there was no one at home to care for their children.

It was two weeks before Mommy could get me in to see the doctors. I stayed home from school during this time. I helped Mommy vacuum the house, wash the floors, and do the dishes. I enjoyed staying home and helping her much more than I enjoyed going to school. On the day of my visit to the doctor's office, Mommy and I drove with Daddy to Fort Leonard Wood. Daddy smoked several cigarettes on the trip, and he kept the window down on his side of the car. It was very cold in the back of the car, but I laid down on the back seat, and the wind and cold air mostly missed me, as did the smoke from Daddy's cigarettes.

Daddy stopped the car and got out when he arrived at his work place. Mommy moved over to the driver side and drove to the Army Hospital. This was not a regular hospital; rather it was a collection of hundreds of wooden buildings all connected by a wooden boardwalk. These buildings were painted the same dull yellow color as the barracks that the soldiers lived in. In fact everything at Fort Leonard Wood was painted the same dull yellow color. Mommy called these buildings the "dispensary." She took me inside one of these buildings to visit the doctor. He listened to my heart, took my blood pressure, had me lie down on a table and tapped my stomach with his hands. He held his hands in a funny way when he tapped on my stomach. It looked a lot like how the priest held his hands when he was praying over the chalice in church except in place of the chalice there was just me. "Okay, young man now, I need you to drop your trousers and underpants so I

can check you for a hernia.” He checked me, and said, “Turn your head and cough.” I did this. He did not seem to be impressed with whatever were his findings. After I was dressed, he called Mommy back into the examining room. “Mrs. Heath, I think your son is fine. He does not have a hernia as you suspected, but he might have had a flu, and that might explain why he was lethargic these past couple of weeks. See to it that he eats well and takes plenty of fluids. He should be able to return to school now.”

Mommy drove us home after we left the doctor’s office, because Daddy had the watch and this meant he had to stay at the fort all night. When we got home, I went out to play. I had not been outside in two weeks. When Daddy came home the next day, he saw me playing outside, and wanted to know what I was doing outside. I told him the doctor said I was okay now. Daddy said, “Get your ass in the house. I’ll tell you when you can play outside.” When I returned to school, Sister Matthew had an enormous stack of homework papers waiting for me. She called our house that night and spoke to Daddy about what I needed to do before the term ended. Instead of watching TV at night, I had to do several of the homework assignments in addition to the regular homework assignments. When the school year ended, I still had a week’s worth of homework to do.

I finished all of the homework two weeks after the term ended. Sister Matthew called our house and told Daddy that I could now come in to take all of my final exams. It took three days to complete all of the tests. On Friday, Sister Matthew called Daddy again. I had passed all of my classes with a C except History.

On the History final exam I had made a 100%. This puzzled Sister Matthew, and she suspected that I had cheated. She told Daddy that Danny Harrison, the smartest boy in the class, had only gotten a 95%. Could he bring me over to the convent that evening so she could discuss the test with me?

When we arrived, Sister Matthew asked me about the final exam. I told her I had not talked to Danny Harrison in a couple of weeks, and we never talked about school. She was not convinced. "Well, Mr. Heath, let me ask Timmy a few questions to see how he responds." Daddy said that would be okay. Sister Matthew began, "On the test there was a question about Thomas à Becket. Who was he," she asked.

I replied, "He was an Englishman."

"But what was he," she asked again, but this time with a distinct edge in her voice that sounded much like "Liar, Liar Pants on Fire." I hesitated because I did not understand the question. Then Sister Matthew said, "You see, Mr. Heath."

But Daddy then did something most extraordinary. "Timmy," he said, "what country did Thomas à Becket live in?"

I replied, "England."

"And do you know what city he lived in?"

"Canterbury."

"And what job did he have in that city?"

"He was the archbishop of Canterbury," I replied. Then I added, "He was murdered while saying mass by soldiers who were loyal to King Henry II. The Pope

punished the king for this crime.” Sister Matthew’s eyes bore a stunned look. They had the look of one who had just seen a talking monkey.

Daddy then said, “I am convinced that Timmy knew all the answers to the test, and that he did not cheat on the test, and that in fact he scored the highest score on the test because he knew all the answers just as he knew the answers tonight.” When we got into the car, Daddy said, “I was proud of what you did tonight.” I broke into tears and Daddy patted me on the head and shoulders. On Monday my final report card came. I was a seventh grader.

When Daddy came home that day, he told me to go out to the car and bring in the bags in the trunk. I found two paper bags stuffed full of books and papers. They had an uncanny resemblance to the bag of books I had tossed out on the last day of school at Saint Thomas Aquinas. I brought the bags into the house and placed them on the living room floor and waited for Daddy.

I got down on my knees and looked over the contents of the bags. These were all of my textbooks from sixth grade and mimeographed pages of homework and tests. Daddy came down the stairs from his bedroom, and as he entered the living room, he said, “This summer you will not be going outside to play, because you are going to complete all of the homework and take all of the tests for all of the courses you had this year in sixth grade. You will not watch any TV either. The only time you will go outside will be to go to church on Saturday and Sunday. At the end of each day, you will have all the work you have done on the kitchen table at my

place, and I will check it for accuracy and completeness. If you don't do exactly as I say, I will beat your ass to death. Do you understand me?"

My eyes began to tear up, but I managed to nod in the affirmative. Then Daddy said, "Now, take all this material to your room, and come down here and set the table."

The next day I worked on spelling, religion, arithmetic, and history. I completed all the assignments, and then I started on the reading book. I was somewhat amazed at the first story I read. I had no recollection of the story from earlier in the year. I wondered why that might have been. When I had done all the work for the first day, I put all the pages together and left them on the kitchen table in a neat pile. I wanted Daddy to see how hard I had worked that day. I really wanted him to say something, like "You can go out and play now. You can watch TV."

When I sat down to eat dinner, I expected to be praised for the hard work I had done that day and the good job I had done on my homework. What I got was a rude slap across my face, and a promise to have "the shit beat out" of me the next day, if my work did not improve. "You did not dot the letter i in most of your written work. Your handwriting is sloppy, and you did not show every step in your arithmetic homework. If you think I am kidding around with you on these assignments, you better get ready to have a new set of teeth in your head, because I will knock your teeth down your goddamn throat till you choke if you do this again. Do you hear me," he said. The slap on the face had been so hard and unexpected,

that I still saw stars as I answered with a whimpered, "Yes, Daddy." It seemed that surrender was the only shield I had for defense. Mommy sat silently as did Brian and Jeannie. After dinner and dishes, I went back to my bedroom and pretended to read, but actually I listened to the TV program blaring in the living room below. I wondered why we needed to have the TV turned up so loudly that it could be heard clearly so far away.

## 21

As the days of summer passed, I left my bedroom less and less often. Daddy's rage began to subside after the first week, and from that time on, he would just put a check mark on the pages I gave him. He never commented about my homework. He never told me I was doing a good job, and I assumed that if I did not get slapped or spanked, I was not doing a bad job. Until late July, I did not go outside except to go to church. Then at Mass, Father Brauner announced that there would be a boy's retreat at Subiaco monastery in Arkansas for those interested. When we got home, I could hear Mommy and Daddy talking about sending Brian and me to Arkansas. A couple of Sundays later, Mommy packed our suitcases. I was told we would leave for the monastery after Mass. While at church, Brian became ill and vomited, so I was the only one going to Subiaco. Outside the church, many of my friends from school were there with their suitcases. Even boys who lived at Fort Leonard Wood were there. In all a dozen of us were loaded into two cars and off we went.

Daddy gave me an envelope just before we left from the church. Inside was my application to go on the retreat. There was also money. "The registration fee is five dollars. The other five dollars is for you to buy essentials at the store if you need anything. Bring back whatever you do not spend." Mommy had gone home in the car with Brian. Daddy pointed to one of the cars and said, "You need to get in the car." Then he walked away; I assumed he was walking toward our house. Standing out on the curb was Sister Matthew. I greeted her, and then she said, "Come here, Timmy." I walked over to her. "I heard that you have been confined to your bedroom all summer. Is that true?" I told her it was true. She told me to have fun in Subiaco.

The most interesting part of the trip to Subiaco was the discussion the two men who drove had about the best road to take to get there. One man had a road map, and the other man read the printed instructions that Father Brauner had given them. I expected the men to get into a fight about who was right, but instead they just talked about the trip. We were the lead-car, and after we crossed into Arkansas from Missouri, both cars pulled over to the side of the road. All the men got out of their cars and discussed the best route to take to get to the destination. I did not know that men could discuss things like this, and kept waiting for one of the men to start yelling at the others, but that never happened. Some of the men told jokes, and all of them seemed to be in a good mood even if they were unsure of where they were headed. After a few minutes of discussion the men got back into the cars, and we headed toward Subiaco with what seemed to be the common opinion on how to



get there. It was nearly two in the afternoon when we arrived at the monastery. It was a beautiful stone building. It looked ancient. It looked like Saint Benedict himself had built it.

Brothers from the abbey greeted us and led us to an administrative area. I was with a group of six boys. We were taken to a waiting room. An old priest with fuzzy white hair combed back over his bald spot and blue, blood shot eyes, came out from a room behind the waiting room and called us in to see him one at a time. The boy in front of me was Alan Kister. He was not Catholic, but the retreat was open to all boys who attended St. Francis DeSales. Through the closed door, I could hear the priest ask Alan some questions about himself. At the end of the conversation he told Alan there was a five-dollar fee for attending. Alan said, "My father said he could not afford to pay the fee and asks that I be allowed to attend nonetheless without payment." The priest said that would be all right. He asked Alan if he had any money that he wanted to put into the store fund so that he could get treats at break time. Alan told the priest he had no money for that either. The priest walked Alan to the door. Alan left with one of the brothers. I was the last student in the room. I gave the priest my five dollars for the week at Subiaco, and I gave him five dollars for the student store. A different brother took me to my classmates. On the way to meet my friends, I wondered about Alan Kister. Daddy was a Sergeant, and I knew we had no money. Alan's father was a Major and must have had a lot of money. I thought it very strange that he did not have to pay.

On the way to the dormitory, I noticed graffiti on the walls. Then as we got closer to the dormitory I was to stay in, I began to see pictures drawn on the walls of people doing strange things to each other. On some of the unused cots in the dorm, I saw *Playboy* magazines and pinned to the walls I saw centerfold pictures. I asked the brother what all this was, he said, "We call this the 'animal house.' This is where the boys who are about to graduate live. We don't pay any attention to them." In the distance, I could see my classmates.

We were assigned a table for dinner. Each night we would sit at the same table. Sitting at my table was a boy who had in mind to make my days at Subiaco an occasion to remember. He was blond and had a distinct southern accent. He called me "Messy Sewer," because that was what he said Missouri sounded like to him. He must have been pretty good at geography too, because he said Missouri was the messy sewer for the entire nation since all the sewage from all the states flowed through Missouri and came out at Saint Louis. I tried to ignore him, but he just continued to rant on about Messy Sewer. I ate my dinner meal quickly, and left the table. I just went out to the church garden and walked around by myself wondering what I should do about my tablemate. After a while, all the boys came out from the dinner meal.

We were told to go join the groups we had come with because there was going to be a race. Each group was to select a boy to run the hundred-yard dash. In our group, we chose Alan Kister. At St. Francis DeSales, Alan seemed as fast as a cheetah. The boys who were to race gathered at the starting line. We waited at the

finish line so we could cheer on Alan. When the words “ready, set, go” were announced, about a dozen boys burst out of the starting blocks and headed toward us. Alan was not in the lead, but we had seen him shift a gear and nearly double his speed in a matter of strides. We cheered him by name, we jumped up and down in anticipation of seeing a blinding burst of speed exit from his heels, but as one boy after another crossed the finish line, we saw Alan still heading to the finish line. Alan did not finish the race, and his presence was lost in the swarm of boys who gathered around the local heroes who finished first, second, and third. We were sad that Alan had lost, and we tried to console him. He said he had hurt his leg and had eaten too much for dinner.

Later that night one of the brothers brought out his guitar, and we sang songs before going to bed. The next two days were filled with sports, chapel, and instruction about what the Benedictine Order was all about. Much was made of St. Benedict and his twin sister Scholastica. The monastery had a raven that was kept as a mascot, because St. Benedict had once had one. The legend was that Benedict’s life was saved by the bird when some of Benedict’s more unruly subordinates attempted to poison him.

On Wednesday, we took a bus to a local lake so that we could swim. I did not know how to swim, but by carefully holding on to the lines that marked the beginning of the deep water, I was able to make it out to a floating pier where the rest of my classmates were. On the pier, there was a diving board, and many of the boys were using it to jump into the water. The first boy I saw on the diving board

was the blond boy from my table. He leapt off the board and did a cannon ball as he entered the water. It made a huge splash almost like a depth charge I had seen in movies about submarines being chased by destroyers. I was talking to a couple of my friends on the pier explaining how I managed to get out to the pier without knowing how to swim when I felt a hand on my shoulder and heard someone say, "Hey Messy Sewer, hop in." Suddenly, I was in the water. I thrashed about for several seconds and probably shouted for help. For a brief instant, I recall the death of my friend, Dickie Dawson who had drowned when he was ten. We had a special Mass for him at Saint Thomas Aquinas. My classmates jumped in the water after me, and one of them, Chris Rodas, pushed me close enough to the pier so that I could grab it. From the pier, I could see the blond boy bent over in laughter pointing at me.

At dinner that night, the blond haired boy did not sit at our table. I never saw him again for the rest of the week.

I slept most of the way home on the return trip from Subiaco. When we arrived back at St. Francis, we unloaded our suitcases. One by one, the parents of the other boys came to take them home. Several offered me a ride, but I was sure that my parents were coming to get me, so I declined their offers. Finally, I was the only boy left in front of the church still waiting for a ride. I paced back and forth between the front of the church and the front of our red brick schoolhouse. After a few laps between the two buildings, I saw Sister Mathew walking toward me. "Your mother called earlier. She and your dad are stuck at Bennett Springs and they want

you to walk home.” I thanked her for the message, and as I picked up my suitcase and began to walk home, I wondered if she had waited until all the others had departed before she gave me the message. My suitcase was not terribly heavy. I would walk a hundred paces, and then I would change arms. I was home in fifteen minutes.

Jeannie was in the living room playing *Oklahoma* on the phonograph. She got up when I walked through the door, and gave me a big hug. She wanted to know all about the trip, what I did, was it fun; did I want to go back? I told her that I had fun, but I gave her no details about the trip. Then I went upstairs to my bedroom and opened my suitcase. On top of my clothes was a five-dollar bill. This was the money Daddy gave me for essentials. I had not bought anything from the student store so that I could return all of his money to him. It was not so much that I did not want candy or chips or sodas, as it was the feeling I had about the entire Subiaco adventure. I walked toward Daddy’s nightstand and placed the five-dollar bill there. Tears began to pour from my eyes and roll down my cheeks. I stopped next to Daddy’s bed. The room seemed very dark even though it was only four o’clock in the afternoon. A sense of sadness about the trip came over me. I could still see the images drawn on the dormitory walls, all of the words written on those walls, but most of all I remembered the blond boy laughing at me as I nearly drowned when he shoved me into the water. I wondered why Catholics would behave like this. I wondered if any of the people I had seen that week were really Catholic at all. I knew Alan Kister was not Catholic and that might excuse him for not paying the

registration fee, but I wondered about all the rest. My breathing became hard, and I felt like I wanted to escape from everything I knew and was. The gloom did not pass. I went downstairs and asked Jeannie if Daddy would get mad at me if I went out to play.

She said she did not know. I could hear Brian in the backyard, so I went out and asked him if Daddy had said anything about me being able to play outside. He had no opinion on the subject. Brian was playing with the next-door neighbors. They were all girls. Carmelita was the oldest. She said I should go and ask her mother what I should do. I was on my way to ask her if Daddy had left any instructions for me when Mommy and Daddy pulled into our driveway. I was walking toward our car when Daddy got out of the car and said, "You better get your ass inside the house before I kick the shit out of you." I ran in terror to the hoped for safety of my bedroom.

After Daddy went to work on Monday, I told Mommy about my trip to Subiaco. I told her about the boy who pushed me into the water. She became noticeably agitated as I told my story, then she gave me a big hug.

I was still working on the assignments I had been given for the summer when Mommy took all of us to Mass on August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven. We walked to church. When Mass was over, Sister Mathew was waiting outside to speak with us. She chatted politely with Mommy, but eventually the conversation got around to me and my summer of study. Mommy

told her that I was still confined to my room, and that I would probably remain confined there until the school year started in September.

The next day, Mommy told me that she had arranged for swimming lessons for Brian and me at the pool in Lebanon. She said that Daddy had given me permission to spend the morning at the pool, but I had to study in the afternoon. By the end of the first day, I could open my eyes underwater, tread water, and drown proof myself. At the end of the week, I was swimming a hundred yards nonstop. I had learned three different strokes. On Friday, we had a ceremony at the end of the course. Some of my classmates, who had gone with me to Subiaco, came to watch me graduate. The following Monday, Mommy told me that Daddy said I did not need to study or do any more assignments until school started.

## 22

Sometime during the summer, Jeannie had made up her mind that she wanted to be a nun. She had sent off to a Benedictine school for information about religious vocations. The day after Labor Day, Jeannie took a bus to Fort Smith Arkansas, where she became a Postulant at St. Scholastica. Neither Brian nor I had been told about Jeannie's plan by our parents. Our eyes were filled with tears as we waved goodbye to Jeannie. Silently we wondered who there would be to protect us from Daddy now that Jeannie was not home.

A week after Labor Day, we started school. There was a big surprise when we got to class. Sister Luke had become ill during the summer, and had been

replaced by a new principal, Sister Annunciata. She would be my teacher for seventh grade. Sister Matthew would be Brian's teacher for sixth grade.

For the first six weeks of the term, I was astonished at the grades I was receiving in my studies. I was making perfect scores in spelling, history, and religion. Arithmetic was still my bane, but I was making a high C in the course. I remembered what Daddy had said at the end of the previous year. He had promised a dollar for each A and fifty cents for each B. When I got my report card, I quickly converted the grades into cash, and realized that Daddy would be paying me \$4.50 for this report card. I was so proud of my efforts and the grades I had received that I waited for Daddy in the front yard for a half hour to announce my good news.

Finally, Daddy arrived. He was in his fatigues and looked tired. He got out of the car, and I told him I got my report card that day. I was giddy with joy. My knees wobbled I was so pleased to be able to tell him my news.

"Daddy, you owe me \$4.50 for my report card," I said expecting him to reach for his wallet and give me the cash.

"I don't owe you a goddamn cent. Who the hell do you think you are telling me that I owe you anything," he said as he brushed by me and went into the house, and yelled to Mommy, "Let's eat." Brian had not done well on his report card. He made mostly Cs and a couple of Bs. There were new issues with Sister Matthew. He had put his report card on the table at Daddy's place.

When Daddy looked at Brian's report card, he asked, "What happened?" Brian tried to explain that he and sister Matthew did not see eye to eye. Daddy



responded, "Get over it. She's the nun. Listen and learn." He took a few more bites of dinner, and asked, "Where's your report card." I told him it was in the bedroom. "Get it," he said. I ran upstairs and retrieved it. On the way down stairs, I imagined a small pile of money on at my place, but when I got there I saw no money. Daddy looked over the report card, and asked, "What happened in arithmetic?" I explained that it was hard, but that I made a C and not a D. Daddy looked at the grades like he was memorizing them, and then he flipped the report card back to me. For the rest of the dinner we ate in silence except for the sounds of the radio station KLWT and the clicking noise that came from Daddy's jaw. I did not dare ask Daddy again for the money he had promised. When I got my next report card six weeks later, I received even better grades, but when I left my report card at Daddy's place at the dinner table, his only comment was "good" as he handed back my report card. I did not remind him of his promise of money for grades.

## 23

On All Saints Day, we drove to Fort Leonard Wood to look at the progress being made on the Capehart housing project. We would soon be occupying one of these new houses. Daddy took us to look at the one we would be living in. It was a three-bedroom house. There was a dining area and a nice sized living room. Brian and I would each get our own room as Jeannie was away for eleventh grade in Arkansas. I picked the smaller of the two rooms, because it had a large picture window that allowed me to look out on the small forest that grew at the back of our

yard. Between this room and my parent's room there was a small utility area where the washer and dryer would be placed. I knew if I shut my door, I would not have to listen to Daddy snoring all night. The room Brian chose shared a common wall with my parent's room.

Daddy came home later that week and announced that we would be moving into our new house the day after Thanksgiving. Mommy was very happy about this. She would no longer make endless trips to the basement to wash the clothes. The Capehart house came with 220 volt wiring. This meant that Mommy did not have to haul the clothes 100 feet out into the backyard where Daddy put up the clothesline. Behind our house in Lebanon was the Catholic cemetery, and while it was peaceful, it was not a cheery sight to behold. The little forest behind our new house seemed a much better choice of scenery than a century old cemetery. Daddy would be happy too, because after each rain, our Lebanon basement would flood with a foot of water. The new house had no basement.

Mommy made her traditional Thanksgiving dinner of roasted turkey, gravy, potatoes, stuffing, and cranberries. When the dinner was done, Mommy packed the leftovers and put them in a box that she placed in the refrigerator, so we would have dinner ready to eat when we moved the next day.

Before Brian and I were up the next day, Mommy had taken down all the curtains in preparation for the movers who would arrive at nine. Right on time, a huge Grey Line van pulled into to our driveway. Within minutes of its arrival men began to box everything we owned into cardboard cartons that were then

transported into the truck. By noon, they had everything in boxes. Some of the heavy furniture was already inside the truck. Our beds, sofas, chairs, and dinner table were now standing silently inside the moving van waiting for their new home. By one o'clock the movers were on their way to Fort Leonard Wood. Daddy had given them the key to the house and told them we would be there by five. After the movers left, we washed the floors, cleaned the sinks and toilets, and took out the trash and put it in the garbage cans. Mr. Suggs, the owner came to inspect the house. He praised Mommy for being such a good housekeeper and gave her back all the deposit she and Daddy had put down on the house the previous September. Before we left, Mommy got the box of food out of the refrigerator. It sat on her lap as we drove to Fort Leonard Wood.

It was dusk when we arrived at the house, and the movers were carrying in the final boxes from their truck. They gave Daddy paperwork to sign, but before he would sign, he counted all the boxes to make sure nothing was missing. While he was doing that, Mommy began unpacking the Thanksgiving Day dinner. Daddy signed the papers and walked the driver out to his van. When he came into the house, he asked Mommy what she was doing. "I'm preparing dinner," she said. "Not that. Today's Friday and we don't eat meat on Friday. You will have to fix something else." Mommy had a look on her face like she had just been hit. Then she said, "It will take an hour to get something ready." Daddy replied, "Fine." While Mommy made tuna casserole, Brian and I helped Daddy move the boxes. Though the house came with a stove and a refrigerator, it did not come with lights, so none

of the rooms had any lights in them. We worked by the faint light coming from the light on the kitchen stove. After Mommy took the tuna casserole out of the oven we used the oven light to eat by. The nearly dark house was quiet. We had no radio to listen to and Daddy was not in a talking mood. After dinner, Daddy said it would be a good idea for us to do the dishes, and then go to bed. By seven that night we were all in bed. We had assembled our beds, but slept on unmade mattresses, because we could not find the box with sheets and pillowcases. By the time we had our turkey dinner the next night, all the boxes had been emptied, broken down and put in the trash bin. Mommy and Daddy argued about the stuffing having ptomaine poisoning because Mommy had kept it out of the refrigerator for so long the day before. Brian and I were so hungry when we had dinner that we would have eaten rat poison had it been placed before us. No one became ill on the leftover turkey dinner.

## 24

The Monday after Thanksgiving we took our first school bus ride to St. Francis DeSales. Until the Thanksgiving weekend, only the officers had housing at Fort Leonard Wood. All the enlisted personnel lived off the post. That weekend hundreds of families took up residence on the post. When the school bus arrived, the officers' children, even though they were our classmates, were shocked that they had to share their bus with the children of enlisted men. Even though there were open seats on the bus, many of these children were unwilling to let an enlisted man's child sit next to them. "You can't sit here," was said by more than one child.

Finally the bus driver told the officers' children, "You will need to let all the children have a seat if one is available." Reluctantly the officers' children began to remove their book bags or feet from the open seats, and we began to take our places on the bus. We faced the same issue on the trip home, and again the bus driver had to plead for seats for the children of the enlisted soldiers. I felt badly that children who played with me at school did not think I was good enough to sit next to them on the bus. I was ashamed that Daddy was an enlisted man.

The story we related to Mommy when we got home must have been recounted in a several dozen houses at Fort Leonard Wood that night. Our phone rang until well past nine. The next day instead of a yellow Blue Bird school bus pulling up in front of our house, there was an Army cruise liner bus with a military driver in uniform taking us to school. There were a few officers' children on the bus, but most of us were enlisted children. More than a few of us were angry with the officers' children, but we did not hold our grudge very long. I resented my father for being an enlisted man and putting us through this humiliation by our classmates, but I wondered if my behavior would have been any better than theirs if Daddy had been an officer.

We attended midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at the chapel on Fort Leonard Wood. The next morning, we opened our presents. Mommy bought me two Hardy Boys books. *The Tower Treasure* and the *Mystery of the Cliff Road* would be the first of dozens of books that I read in the second semester. The Hardy Boys series helped me to love reading. From that Christmas Day on, I was never without a book to read.

Daddy bought me a telescope for stargazing. Jeannie sent me her old radio. She had Mommy wrap it and put it under the Christmas tree for me. It was the nicest Christmas I could remember. That night and many nights afterwards, I lay in bed with Jeannie's radio caressed against my head while listening to the news and music from far away radio stations in places like Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Dallas, El Paso, and Nashville. Suddenly my world had expanded to a thousand times the size of my family and neighborhood.

Daddy had invited the nuns and Father Brauner to our house for Christmas dinner. Because Jeannie was now a Novitiate at Saint Scholastica, they were able to accept the invitation to dine with us. Daddy had selected prime rib for our dinner, and Mommy spent hours cleaning her sterling silverware that had not been used in several years. She rubbed away all the tarnish revealing the gleaming silver. She also brought out her china set that Daddy had bought her when he was in Japan on R&R during the Korean War. It was a beautiful set that was cream colored with a pale green one-inch stripe near the rim. The edges of the dinnerware were trimmed in gold. Brian and I helped to set the table. When we were done, our table looked more elegant than the table in the restaurant at the Statler Hilton Hotel in Saint Louis. The table setting made me feel very good when I looked at it. It only awaited our honored guests and the prime rib.

Brian and I went out to play with Ronnie Wrobleski. He also went to St. Francis, but Mommy told us not to tell him that the nuns were coming to eat. Ronnie had received a new sled for Christmas, and behind his house was a steep hill that

overnight had become covered with several feet of freshly fallen snow. Even as we were admiring his sled, snow fell. From Ronnie's backyard we would take a running start at the hill. Then we would try to ride the sled down the hill to the shallow valley below. In half an hour, we had cut a path well over a hundred yards long into the snow-covered hillside. The path led from Ronnie's backyard almost to the floor of the valley below. Snow fell relentlessly all the while. With each new run down the hill we felt as if we were Olympians on wild toboggan rides.

Our wide world of sports adventure ended when Mommy called us for dinner. We left Ronnie promising to return the next day. We expected to see another car in the driveway, but when we got home, Mommy told us the nuns had called and said that Route 66 was closed due to snow. I felt badly about this. Mommy had made such a beautiful dinner and set such a wonderful table. All her work would go unrecognized. At dinner, I made a point of telling Mommy how lovely the table looked, and that I felt like I was back in the hotel restaurant in Saint Louis. Daddy gave Brian and me an extra thick piece of prime rib for our dinner. Daddy had put on records on our phonograph for our dinner, and as we ate, sweet music complemented our food. I looked out the living room window at the falling snow, and it seemed for that moment life was perfect, except for my sister's absence.

To celebrate New Year's 1960, Daddy bought a gallon can of mixed nuts, a huge bag of potato chips, and sodas. Every New Year's Eve, he challenged us to a game of chess. December 31, 1959, was no different, except that Jeannie was not there to play too. She had come close to beating Daddy more than once, but he

always found a way to win. In anticipation of the evening's game, Brian and I had been practicing, and we felt we were getting better at chess. I was to play Daddy first. I decided that I would copy every move that Daddy made. At some point in the game when I felt it might be to my advantage to make a different move, I would change my strategy. After the first ten moves, Daddy began to become irritated with me. "All you're doing is following my moves. That's not chess."

I replied, "There is no rule about what move you can make on the chessboard except that you cannot move your king into check," I replied.

"You're not playing chess when all you do is copy my moves," Daddy said. I did not answer. I just kept making the same moves he made. After twenty moves, I noticed that Daddy's queen was lined up with one of my bishops. When it was my turn to move, I captured his queen. Being ahead by a queen, I began to play a very conservative game. I started to exchanges pieces with him clearing the board of as many pieces as I could until only my queen and a pawn remained to defend my king. Daddy had a knight and no pawns. When I advanced my pawn to the end of the board, I asked for another queen. Daddy resigned. I shouted, "I won. I beat Daddy."

Daddy quickly ended my fun, "You did not win. I beat myself. All you did was copy my moves. Your victory did not count. You did not win. Do you hear me? You did not win!"

Like a beaten dog, I submissively answered, "Yes, sir." On the inside, I was aglow with the light of victory's torch, though I could not show it on the outside. I



thought to myself, I am in seventh grade, and I beat my dad at chess. Brian began 1960 losing his game to Daddy.

In January, Brian joined the Boy Scouts. This seemed to be something that he had worked out with Mommy, because she took him to his first meeting. He had never mentioned scouting to me, and I was surprised that he had thought about joining but had not told me. Just as I was trying to create my own world away from Daddy, Brian seemed to be creating his own world away from me. When Brian came home, all he wanted to do was to tell me about the meeting. They had played games, worked on Boy Scout crafts and skills, like Morse code. The scoutmaster ended the meeting by telling a story around a campfire. It took a month of listening to Brian talk about Scouts before I joined him.

I was surprised to learn that I had to fill out an application and pay money to join the Boy Scout Troop. As a part of my application fee, I was given a Boy Scout Manual. During my first evening as a scout, we played games, worked on crafts and skills. Just as Brian had said, the scoutmaster ended the evening by telling a story. He told us to gather around the campfire. His campfire was a flashlight wrapped in red cellophane. The flashlight was placed in a small pile of twigs and branches. It looked like it was on fire. The scoutmaster told a story about how Native Americans would hunt buffalo before the arrival of the horse. Before we left, the scoutmaster announced that in two weeks there would be a campout, and the boys who wanted to attend needed to bring \$5.00 the following week to cover the cost of food.

After the meeting when we got into the car, we begged Mommy to let us go. She agreed to ask Daddy. We explained to her that we would leave early on Saturday morning, and we would be back after lunch on Sunday.

Daddy thought that the camping trip would be good for us and gave us the money to pay for it. I did not have a backpack or sleeping bag, but I had an old flannel blanket. Inside this contraption, I put a change of underwear and my pillow. I rolled it up and tied the ends with twine and used it as my backpack. On the morning we were to go camping, Brian ran a fever of 101 degrees, and Mommy and Daddy said he could not go on the camping trip. On his way to work, Daddy dropped me off at the rendezvous site for the camp out. I threw my blanket now turned backpack into the back of the truck that would haul our tents and bedding to the campsite. The scoutmaster asked me about Brian, and then suggested, after he surveyed my bedding, that I might need an extra blanket or two. It was cold that morning. I had spit on the fender of a parked truck, and my spit had instantly turned into a frozen blob that looked like a giant snowflake. I was dressed in a light jacket. I had no hat or gloves, but I was ready for the first camping I had done in ten years.

About thirty boys went on the outing. The plan called for our belongings to be taken to the campsite while we were to be dropped off several miles from our destination. We would hike into the campsite. When we got out of the cars and trucks that had hauled us to the starting point, we were told to walk to the dry river bed and then follow it south for two miles. We would see the campsite. On the way to the dry creek, some of the boys began to call out the name of the trees and plants

in this area of Fort Leonard Wood: walnut, oak, dogwood, and plantain. Along the way, we encountered a dead calf. We stood around it looking. One of the boys poked it with a stick. Speculation began about how it died. "Starved, killed by dogs, killed by rustlers, killed by a bobcat, too weak to live and shot by the owner" were among the theories advanced. We were still speculating when we found the dry riverbed, and then speculation shifted to which direction was south. One boy tried to use the hands on his watch to figure out where north was. Others tried to figure out which direction the sun was heading. "It rises in the east and settles in the west," someone said. "Yeah, but which way is it heading now?" Finally, one of the older boys pulled out his compass and found magnetic north. "If magnetic north is this way," he said pointing to his left, "then we should head this way down the dry creek, because that has to be south." His compass, his age, and his reasoning seemed to trump all other arguments as to which direction was south, and we all headed to the right as we followed the waterless track.

I become very thirsty and hoped that we would soon find our campsite. About half an hour down the river bed, we saw smoke in the distance, and then a truck that looked a lot like the one that hauled our tents, backpacks, and bedding. Cheered on by the knowledge that we had chosen the correct direction to travel, we picked up the pace considerably and arrived at the destination quickly, almost running the last hundred yards.

We were organized into "patrols" (a group of 5-7 boys) and each patrol pitched its own tent. The boy who had the compass was my patrol leader, and he

asked me to go gather squaw wood. I asked what that was, and he said it was fine dry branches that would be ideal for starting a fire. I spent the next hour searching for the right kind of wood and came back to the campsite with a large bundle of this type of wood. Other boys had been collecting wood too. I watched as the more advanced boys began to put the firewood together. They had some newspaper that they shredded and then mixed with the squaw wood. On top of this they added sticks that were a half-inch thick and two to three feet long. There was a small pile of wood an inch to several inches thick set aside for use after the fire got roaring hot. A few stones surrounded the fire pit, and there was not much chance of our fire spreading as the area around our campsite was mostly loose dirt and stone, but the Scoutmaster said, "Be prepared." We gathered lots of stones to surround the fire. Hadrian would have been impressed with the wall of stone surrounding the fire-pit. Later in the evening, we would use the stones as seats while we cooked and ate our dinner.

To the collection of paper and twigs one of the boys added a lit match. Once the paper began to burn, he dropped down on his knees and began to gently blow the flames that began to appear in the pile of twigs and squaw wood. As the fire grew higher and hotter he began to add larger twigs and branches. After about five minutes, a roaring blaze rapidly turned wood into heat around which all the scouts now drew near to warm themselves. A fire started with one match marked an expert fire-maker from all other classes of fire-makers.

For dinner that night we ate hamburgers, fried potatoes, and pork and beans all cooked over the fire that had been started hours earlier. This was the first food I had eaten since breakfast, and it was as good and filling as my Christmas Day prime rib dinner. After our we filled our bellies, we sang songs and listened to stories from our Scoutmaster. One story he told us was about a boy who had grown up very poor. His poverty prevented him from owning shoes. Somehow he got into a very good college because he was very smart. He was given money to buy shoes, and just before he graduated, he died. It turned out that the callouses on his feet had protected him from snakebites, but as his feet became soft from wearing shoes some of the poison from a previous snake bite was released, and he died from snakebite in the middle of Harvard Square, Boston.

When I stepped away from the brightness of the fire, I looked up at the sky and saw the same sky I remembered seeing on the camping trip at Royal Gorge in Colorado when I was almost four. A bright band of stars stretched from horizon to horizon. Though I had never seen it before, I knew this must be the Milky Way. I was impressed at how accurately the Greeks had named this celestial event. It did look like the sky had been splashed with milk.

Around ten o'clock, we all turned in for the night. I wrapped my thin blanket around my body and settled down on my mattress of dried leaves. I woke up repeatedly during the night from chills. I curled up as much as I could so that the blanket would wrap around me more. I slept fitfully until late in the night when I heard voices outside the tent. I got up to see what was happening. As I left the tent,

I looked at the sky. To the west, it could have been midnight, but as I looked easterly, a streak of light was building on the horizon, and it did look like the crack of dawn. The noise I heard from inside the tent turned out to be half dozen boys and men standing near the fire-pit. Two boys were coaxing fire from the embers by feeding them fresh kindling. As I moved closer to the group, the tinder stopped smoking and caught fire. There was a delightful release of light and heat that warmed my face, hands, and clothes. Soon I forgot about the chills of the night and began to warm myself and wonder when we would eat breakfast.

Breakfast that day was dried cereal and milk. After breakfast, the scoutmaster began to bark orders to the older boys in the troop who began to direct the younger boys to break the camp and to prepare to head home. By ten we had loaded our gear onto the truck and then began retracing our steps from the camp to the dry riverbed. From there, we headed north for a mile and hopefully toward the vehicles that would carry us back to our departure point on the main part of the post.

I had expected to have fun on the camping trip. On the hike back to civilization, I pondered why I had not had fun. I had no sleeping bag, knew no one on the trip, did not have the proper clothes, and was generally ignorant about everything going on in nature. I realized that I could learn a lot from Boy Scouts.

## 25

When I woke up on Monday morning, I was not feeling well, but I went to go to school so I could talk about my camping trip. By noon, I was feeling achy, and when we left school for Fort Leonard Wood, I was running a fever of a few degrees. Sister Annunciata had given me back all my classwork from the previous week and told me to correct it all and to then turn it to her the next day. When I got home, I was too ill to work on my schoolwork and went to bed after dinner. As I lay in bed, I listened to the radio I had gotten for Christmas. The weather report from Kansas City, Missouri stated that a cold front was headed east. It forecasted at least a foot of snow. The Saint Louis station predicted at least two feet of snow overnight.

Early the next morning the phone rang. After Daddy hung up the phone, he came down to my bedroom and told me that the school was closed, and that we would stay home that day. Then he went to Brian's room and told him the news. I felt worse than I had on Monday after school and curled up in bed and slept until Mommy came in and asked me if I wanted lunch. She took my temperature. It was still high, but lower than Monday night. I had some soup and went back to bed. Instead of sleeping, I got out *The Tower Treasure* Hardy Boy book and began to read.

I was surprised how much I enjoyed the book. I was shocked at how much I enjoyed reading. I was a slow reader, but by the time Daddy came home at the end of his workday, I had read sixty pages. That night, instead of going to bed after dinner, I took out my arithmetic book and began to rework all of the problems I had

missed on my homework assignment. As I read the instructions to the chapter, I began to understand the assignment in a way that I had not when I originally worked the problems. I worked the first problem and got the right answer. Over the next two hours, I had reworked several pages of homework problems correctly. I was tired by this time, and decided to go to bed. I turned out the bedroom lights and looked out the window. Snow fell in feather size flakes as if someone were emptying the contents of a pillow. Before I crawled into bed, I plugged in my radio and turned it on in search of distant radio stations. It was not long before found a forecast for Lebanon.

Snow!

The report listed the highways that would be closed, and Route 66 was one of them. I slipped out of bed and made my way down the hall to Brian's room. I told him we would not have school the next day. "How do you know," he asked. "I heard it on the radio," I told him. He did not sound convinced, but at six o'clock the next morning when the phone rang, he was not surprised to hear the news: no school.

The following day, I decided to stay in the house, and continued reading my book. As lunch approached, I passed the one hundred-page mark. I was amazed that I had read so much that morning. I felt weary from reading. I decided that I needed a break. Brian and I went out to play in the snow that afternoon. It seemed like all the neighborhood children were playing in the snow. We learned from them that most of their teachers could not get on the post due to the snowstorm, so the schools on Fort Leonard Wood were closed too. That evening after dinner, I finished



all of the corrections to my arithmetic homework. I had not asked for any help and had taught myself what I needed to know by reading the instructions in the arithmetic book. I was so proud of what I had done with the arithmetic homework that I hoped we would go to school the next day, so I could turn in the papers to Sister Annunciata.

We would have a dozen snow days that year, but those first two were like a miracle to me. I had been ill, and just when I needed time to recover, I had been given it. I needed time to correct my homework so that Sister Annunciata would not call Daddy to tell him that I had started to backslide in my studies, and I had been given it. I had learned that if I applied myself to a task like my arithmetic, I could get the job done. Reworking all the pages Sister Annunciata had given me had taught me that I could do the work I needed to do in order to succeed in school. When we returned to school on Thursday, I felt differently about myself, school, and the world I lived in. I felt like I had crossed over into some new dimension of my life.

## 26

The final quarter of the school year passed quickly.

Daddy saw to it that Brian and I were the permanent servers at eight o'clock Mass on Sundays at the main chapel on post.

My grades improved again. I made mostly A's and B's. I even made a B in arithmetic.

One evening at dinner just before the school year ended, Daddy announced that his division was starting a Boy Scout Troop, and he wanted Brian and me to recruit boys to the new organization. He told us to tell all the boys we knew that there would be a big surprise on the first night, but he did not tell us what that would be. Our first meeting was at the elementary school on post and about thirty boys showed up. Daddy stood in front of the largest mountain of Coca Cola bottles I had ever seen. His men had piled up some fifty cases of coke in yellow and red wooden flats each holding twenty-four bottles of soda. A couple of men from his unit cooked hot dogs. He told all of us to grab a bottle of soda and to sit down on the playground's asphalt. The next person to speak said, "I am Private Paul Messick, and I have been asked to be your scoutmaster." He went on to tell us that he was an Eagle Scout, a member of the Order of the Arrow, and that he had earned more than forty merit badges. Then he said something that caught my attention. "Many of the troops at Fort Leonard Wood have fine programs, but most of them have taken the outing out of scouting. By that I mean that this Troop, 154, will have a camping trip every month of the year as long as I am the scoutmaster." This seemed to be good news to almost everyone in attendance, and Paul got a long and loud applause from us. When he finished we were given forms to fill out and told that this troop would meet on Thursday evenings from six until nine. Then we were invited to have hot dogs and potato chips and more sodas.

Six days later the troop was officially inaugurated in a formal ceremony. Daddy's boss, a bird Colonel, was there to encourage all of us to be good scouts and

to share with us how scouting had helped him become the man he had become. Then he said, "I want to thank all the men who helped to put this organization together, especially First Sergeant Gene Heath, who said he would help build the best Boy Scout troop at Fort Leonard Wood. From what I can see here tonight, I think we have the makings of the best outfit in all of Missouri, and you boys will be a part of it." As the others applauded, I got a sense of my dad that I had never had before. I began to get some idea of what it was that he had done to set up our Boy Scout Troop. He had secured the building our troop would use as its meetinghouse. He had motivated Brain and me to get the word out to other boys that a new troop was forming. He had made that first meeting fun with sodas and hot dogs. Finally, he had found the right person to lead the troop when he recruited Paul Messick as scoutmaster. The post photographer was there as well as a reporter. The next week our little organization was in the newspaper for everyone to see. When all the dignitaries were gone, Paul gathered all of us around him and told us that the key to a great troop was hard work on Boy Scout lore. He promised us that we would work on rank requirements every meeting and that we would go camping every month. Then he said that we had three weeks to get ready for our first camp out. "By the time our first camp out is over, I expect all of you will be Tenderfoot Scouts and well on your way to earning your Second Class Scout rank. After we were dismissed, we walked home as a group figuring out how we could most quickly work our way up the ranks of Boy Scouts.

At our next meeting, we were asked to go out to a truck that was parked in front of our Boy Scout building. We unloaded six, five-man tents, pots and pans, shovels, rope, axes, grills, and other gear. "The division has contributed these items to Troop 154 for use on camping trip, but we have an obligation to take good care of this equipment." Then we rolled up the tents and stowed all the equipment in the storage area of our building. Paul told us that our first camp out would be in two weeks. We would leave on Friday night and come back on Sunday afternoon.

This first campout would take place the week after the end of school. Most of the boys in the troop were also students at St. Francis, and we had much to talk about at school. It was soon apparent to us that all the boys in the troop were the sons of enlisted men, and that there were no officers' sons among us. It was not so much that we disliked these boys, as it was their false sense of superiority and unmerited sense of entitlement that we did not like. In Troop 154, rank and position in the troop would be based on merit and effort, not heritage.

Brian and I pestered mommy for signatures. During the weeks before the camp out, we completed many of the requirements necessary to achieve the rank of Tenderfoot. We even began to work on merit badges. Our first badge was Home Repairs, and a significant number of signatures for this award came from Mommy's pen. We straightened out the bent prongs of electrical appliances, changed burned out or dim light bulbs, worked on the yard, located the circuit breaker panel in the hall closet, lubricated hinges, and eagerly sought out Mommy for her signature once we had accomplished a requirement.

The troop's first camp out was near the site that my former troop had used, except instead of camping near the dry creek bed, we scampered up a hill behind the dry creek, and there we pitched our tents and built our camp fire. Each patrol was responsible for bringing its own food. There were cans of beans and assorted vegetables, loaves of bread, peanut butter and jelly, cartons of eggs, whole chickens. Paul brought along venison that had been donated by the Missouri Highway Patrol. He had received several fillets. Our campsite was furnished with an Army water tanker that carried about 200 gallons of fresh water. After our first dinner was done, we listened to stories around the campfire, sang songs, and consumed an entire bag of marshmallows before we went to bed.

I slept soundly until daylight. When I got up, several boys were already eagerly stoking the embers from the previous night, while others were preparing French toast or cooking bacon. My group had brought dry cereal to which we added powdered milk. After breakfast, we cleaned up our campsite and stored our food in coolers and wooden boxes so varmints would not break into it. Then Paul led us on a ten-mile hike.

We stayed up above the valley floor. Paul pointed out poison ivy and advised all of us to stay away from this plant. He told us not to burn it either as it would irritate our lungs and eyes. Along the way, he showed us how to make an emergency shelter, called a lean-to out of locally available materials. We learned how to turn the bark of young trees into rope, and how to make long strands of rope from this material. All along the way, Paul stopped to show us how to use various

plants for food, shelter, or tools. “That’s sorrel,” he said about something that looked like a shamrock. These are acorns from oak trees. They can be eaten, but you need to boil them first.” Every word he said seemed to glue itself to my mind like facts in a history book. By the time we returned to our campsite, we were so hungry, we would have eaten a plate of bark had it been served to us. We started a fresh fire, and roasted weenies on sticks over the open flame. Bread served as buns. We had no condiments. Hunger turned out to be the only condiment we needed as most of us devoured two, three, even four hotdogs in a space of fifteen minutes.

We passed the remainder of the afternoon cleaning the campsite, cutting firewood for the dinner meal, and playing capture the flag. A few boys took signal flags and practiced semaphore signaling, but most of us played capture the flag a game requiring stealth, cunning, and speed. As I grabbed the opposing team’s flag and dashed to our camp, I discovered that I excelled at this type of activity.

By the time we left the campsite on Sunday afternoon, Brian and I had completed all the requirements for Tenderfoot, and were well on our way to completing the hiking and camping merit badges too.

That summer, I began to camp out in the backyard on a chaise lounge. I would bring my pillow and my camping blanket with me. I got over a dozen nights of camping this way. I slept well, but always found myself covered in dew in the early morning. Fortunately, the dew did not penetrate beyond the upper layer of the blanket, so I remained dry and warm at night.

Jeannie came home from her novitiate at St. Scholastica's. There was never any table discussion about Jeannie's decision to go to Mt. St. Scholastica, nor was there any discussion as to why she did not continue going to school there. At some time during the school year, Jeannie had convinced herself that she did not want a vocation as a nun and was ready to resume life with her family. She did talk about seeing Sister Matthew drinking beer, but the way she said it made it hard to tell if Jeannie approved or disapproved of this behavior. For her senior year, Jeannie would go to Waynesville High School. Before she returned home, catalogs from colleges and universities began arriving in the mail. Jeannie's return meant I had to give up my private room with a view of the forest behind our house. I was very happy to have her home and to have the constitution of our family returned to what it had long been. This was a small price to pay to have my sister back.

Once home, Jeannie became the neighborhood babysitter. That summer, she spent most of her time in the houses of other people. Jeannie had always helped Mommy clean our house until she went away. Now, she baby sat for other families, mopped their floors, vacuumed, dusted, cooked meals, and ran errands. Her only day off was Sunday, and even those days began to fill up with baby sitting jobs after Mass was over. It was not until school started, that Jeannie really returned to the house. It was then that her babysitting ended and her studying began. The summer before eighth grade, I began to read the college bulletins Jeannie had requested.

Mount Saint Scholastica, University of Missouri, and Washington University in Saint Louis were among the bulletins she received.

Late in the summer, Mommy became ill and went to the hospital. The doctors decided she needed a hysterectomy. The morning of the scheduled operation, Daddy took Mommy to the hospital. Brian and I went to the swimming pool along with most of the boys who were in our scouting troop. There was a special eight o'clock swim class for Boy Scouts at the NCO pool. To use this pool, your dad had to be a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO/E7 or above), and a dues paying member of the NCO Club on the post. We received four hours of instruction each morning that week. By week's end, we completed all of the requirements for our Swimming Merit Badge. Our instructor was an Army Recreational Specialist. He was a big man who always had a scowl on his face as if someone had offended him, or was going to offend him, or might offend him. He said he was Hawaiian and a descendant of the last king of Hawaii. He told us all if we ever acted up while he was teaching us, he would take us to the middle of the pool and drown us. He had dark eyes. They were darker than sunglasses, and we were never sure if he was looking at us, so we always behaved and called him "sir." He never smiled even after we had completed all of our requirements. We knew he was all business and that he meant business when he was teaching us.

When we returned home that Monday, Mommy was home. We were very pleased to see her, but confused about why she was there as she had told us she would be in the hospital for many days after the operation. "Well," she began, "the



doctor thinks I might be pregnant. He thinks this might explain why I have not been feeling well. He's running a test, and I will know in a couple of days if I am pregnant." Brian and I knew that pregnant had something to do with sex, but just exactly what and how was still a mystery to us. In our Irish-Catholic, patriarchal-authoritarian family if there was a subject we did not discuss, it was sex. Our family, dominated by our First Sergeant father, controlled all of our activities, thoughts, and words. If Daddy was not going to talk about sex, then no one was going to talk about sex. Brian and I did not discuss Mommy's predicament, and whatever Jeannie and Mommy said to each other, if anything, was top secret and our clearance was for unclassified information only.

Mommy was not pregnant, and the following Monday, Mommy and Daddy again left for the hospital where the operation proceeded as scheduled. That evening, Daddy took us all to see Mommy. This became our ritual every night until Mommy returned home on Saturday. The first night that we visited, Mommy had tubes running out from under her sheets, her nose, and both arms. She was groggy and seemed to have the strength of a person a hundred years old. On Saturday afternoon, Daddy left by himself to bring Mommy home. We really wanted Mommy home. It was not that Daddy did not do a good job of running the house. It was that he treated us like things. We were things to clean the floor, wash the dishes, make the beds, do the laundry, and cook the dinner. Mommy always praised us for our work while Daddy flogged us to do our work. Daddy turned everything into suffering or some kind of pain. We were all very happy Mommy was home even if

things ran more smoothly when Daddy was around. We just did not care for his daily inspections of our dusting, vacuuming, and daily chores. Nothing seemed to please him. Did he know we were not in the Army?

## 28

That Labor Day, we picnicked on the western side of Rubidoux River near where the Route 66 bridge passed over the river. Mommy and Daddy brought their fishing poles and Jeannie, Brian, and I brought our badminton set. Mommy had boiled a ham and made homemade potato salad and baked beans. I made a ham sandwich three inches thick. Brian and I got into an eating contest to see who could eat the most ham, but when we had consumed well over half of a ten-pound ham, Daddy put an abrupt end to “that kind of behavior.” There were no nibbles on the hooks, and Daddy said it was because the river was up due to recent rains and that fish did not bite when the water was murky. When we returned home, Mommy told us to get ourselves ready for the next day at school.

The school bus arrived at seven o'clock. I was excited about the new school year. In part, this might have been brought on by the new clothes that Daddy bought us at the Post Exchange (PX). I selected suede shoes that had red rubber soles. I also remembered how well I had done in seventh grade, and was looking forward to an even better year in eighth grade. I was a senior safety-patrol, which meant, I could leave class early to set up the crosswalks and road signs outside of

the school. I was also the most senior altar boy at school, and that meant I could come to class late on days that I served at Mass, and I served at Mass often. By the time school resumed, I was a First Class Boy Scout and working on the rank of Star Scout. I had earned six merit badges.

Sister Annunciata was my teacher for eighth grade, and on Fridays, she gave a test on each subject in our curriculum. The results of these tests were given back on Mondays. When I got my first set of tests back, I had made Bs and Cs in all my subjects. My test grades were lower than what I had earned the year before. The same was true each week of the first grading period. My first report card was disappointing to me. No A's mostly B's and some C's. I did not earn any D's or F's though. As I contemplated this turn about in my performance, I hit on the reason. Jeannie had been studying to be a nun while I was in seventh grade, perhaps Sister Annunciata had given me better grades than I deserved. Now that Jeannie was not studying to be a nun, my grades were as they should have been. I felt good about this insight. Without someone's heavy thumb on the scale, I had earned in the first grading period of eighth grade the best grades of my life. They were not superior grades, but the grades were good grades. When I thought about all of this, I found that I had a positive outlook on life. I also had friends. I found that the bus rides to and from the post was a good time to think about things. When I got off the bus, I was proud of the grades I had earned without the mediation of a sister going to a nunnery. I was cocksure that life was finally going my way, and I looked forward to the journey.

Mommy was waiting for us in our driveway when the school bus pulled up. It was nice to see her there, but also very unusual. In fact, I could not remember a time that she had been waiting for us since we had moved onto the post. "Come on inside, kids, I have something very important to tell you," she said as she escorted us into the house. She had us sit down at the dinner table, and then she said, "Daddy has gotten a new set of orders. We are moving to Fairbanks, Alaska."

The look of resignation on our faces must have been obvious to her. "Daddy said he does not want you to talk to anyone about his orders. He wants to wait to make the announcement. He said 'November' he'd make the announcement."

In our family there was never debate, negotiation, or ambiguity. We did as we were told and questions were not permitted. I picked up my books from the table and went to the bedroom. There Brian and I held our discussion of Daddy's orders to Alaska. Neither Brian nor I ever used the kind of language that Daddy used. Daddy could not speak a sentence without saying damn, or shit, or goddamn, or bastard or bitch or. . . He had a very long list of words like these that he used like hot sauce to heat up his everyday language. Brian now began to use that same kind of language, and before long, he was beating his pillow with his fists. Finally, he buried his head in his pillow and sobbed as if he were being beaten.

I was sitting on my bed as Brian melted down. I got up and went over to him. All I could do was pat him on the back and tell him that things will be okay. I went back to my bed and pulled out my report card. Then I sat on my bed with my back against the wall and read my grades again. I thought to myself that it did not seem

to matter much what I had earned in the first reporting period. By the end of December, I would be in a new school in a new state. I wondered what Jeannie would think about all of this. She was a senior in high school and needed good grades to go to college.

At dinner that night, Daddy talked about his orders and new job in Alaska. He told us that he had an opportunity to make Sergeant Major in his new job, and that would be good for his career. While he was talking, I saw tears bubble up in Jeannie's eyes, and then spill slowly down her cheeks. I saw her tears splash onto her dinner plate like raindrops on a sidewalk. I wished that I could cry too. Then Daddy said, "You can knock that shit off anytime you want. We're going to Alaska whether you or any of you like it. It's my job. In fact, if you have to cry, I want you to leave the table." Jeannie apologized for making a spectacle of herself and left the table. The rest of us just sat there while Daddy continued talking as if nothing important had happened. When Daddy finished talking, we ate the rest of our dinner in silence. I began to develop a severe pain in my stomach, and when dinner was done, I asked Mommy if I could go to my room.

The next morning, as I was leaving for school, Daddy looked at my suede shoes and asked me what had happened to them. I told him, "Nothing." Then he called for Mommy. "Mayme, look at what Timmy has done to his shoes. I just bought those six weeks ago and he's destroyed them." I tried to explain that all I had done was wear the shoes and had not done anything unusual with them or to them, but that was not good enough for Daddy. He ended the conversation with, "You and

I will talk to Mr. Belt when you get home from school. Do you hear me?" I meekly answered, "Yes, sir."

All day at school, I thought about what was going to happen when I got home. Several times during the day, I thought about running away. I knew that people did run away, because I had seen several hoboes come to our school asking for food. Then I started to think about how sad Mommy would be if I ran away. Finally, I resigned myself to whatever was going to happen when I got home. For the first time in my life, I did not care what happened and for the moment, I did not care what Daddy thought or did.

We got home about half past four, and I went straight to my bedroom and began to work on my homework. Usually, I spent the half hour between getting home and Daddy's arrival watching cartoons on TV, but on this day, I did not care about TV. I just wanted to get my homework done. I also wanted to read the new Hardy Boys book I had bought at the Thrift Store. At five after five, Daddy arrived home. As he passed our bedroom on the way to his, he yelled, "Timmy, I want to see you in my room."

Daddy wore a type of belt called a web belt. These belts fastened with a special type of belt buckle. The web belt was held in place on the buckle by a metal post that ran through the buckle. I always knew when Daddy was dressing, because I could hear the metal-on-metal noise coming from the belt buckle. As he passed my room, I heard that ominous sound. I put down my book, and went into my parent's bedroom. Daddy already held the belt in his hand. "Pull down your pants and bend

over,” he said. I did as I was told. Daddy was not the kind of person to hold back on any job he undertook. When he gave a spanking, he meant for it to hurt. He meant for its recipient to be in tears at the end of the spanking, and that always happened.

I counted the swats in silence...six, seven, eight. “Now pull your pants up. If you ever destroy something I have bought for you again I will beat your ass till it bleeds. Now get out of here,” he said. I did as I was told and just looked at him as I left his bedroom. I did not cry, and there were no tears in my eyes. There was something new in my eyes, but I am not sure Daddy saw it. For the first time in my life, there was hatred in my eyes and beneath that was a burgeoning aspiration to get out of his family as soon as possible. I walked slowly to our bedroom. Once inside, Brian whispered, “Eight! Holy cow, how did you manage not to cry? I would have been pleading for mercy. I would have shit myself.” I thought about what Brian said, but I did not feel any kind of victory over not crying. I just did not cry. Even though my butt stung as I sat down on the bed, all I could say to Brian was, “I just don’t care any more. When you don’t care, you don’t feel.” Then I picked up my book and continued studying as if nothing had happened. Momma soon called us for dinner.

A couple of weeks later when I got home from school, I found a shoebox on my bed. I opened it, and inside, I found a new pair of suede leather shoes identical to the ones that Daddy said I had destroyed. I took the box to the kitchen where Mommy was preparing dinner. “Momma, what are these?” I asked.

“Honey, Daddy took your shoes to the PX and talked to the salesman. The salesman said that a lot of people had returned those shoes because they fell apart. The salesman said the manufacturer was replacing all the defective shoes with a better shoe. It seems that they had used rotten material on the shoes we bought.”

“So Daddy spanked me for no reason,” I said.

“Honey, he is very sorry about that. He told me that he will never again spank you. You are too old to be spanked, and he never wants to spank you in anger again. He never wants to spank you for the wrong reason ever,” she said, as she seemed to be searching for some kind of reaction from me over her words.

“Why doesn’t he say that to me?” I asked as I walked out of the kitchen. When I got to my bedroom, I tossed the shoes, box and all, into the closet and plopped down on my bed and read until five. Then I got up and helped set the table.

A month before we were to leave Fort Leonard Wood, Mommy kept us home from school so that we could visit the doctor and the dentist before we went to Alaska. We also got new ID cards. Mommy took us to the PX and bought us all winter coats and gloves in anticipation of our trip to Alaska. That afternoon when the school bus pulled up in front of our house, Brian and I were outside on the driveway playing foursquare. Our classmates on the bus saw us and laughed and shouted, “Look who’s playing hooky.” Mommy had been working in the utility shed at the end of the driveway and had heard our friends. When the bus passed, she told us we could now tell our friends that we had orders for Alaska.



## 29

It was not long after this that the movers showed up at our house. We came home from school, and a truck like all the other moving trucks of my memory, long and wide filled with eager workers gathering and stacking our possessions, stood backed into our driveway in such a way that it blocked one lane of traffic on the street in front of our house. We moved from our house to the guest quarters on the post. On Friday morning, we packed up the car, and headed to Chicago to visit Aunt Margie and Aunt Tee Tee for a few days. Mommy and Daddy rode in the front, and Jeannie, Brian, and I fidgeted in the back seat. It was an uncomfortable five-hour ride, but compared to what was to come, we rode in great comfort. In Chicago, Daddy took Brian and me to the Field Museum of Natural History. We saw a collection of dinosaurs as well as other exciting displays of natural wonders. For lunch, Daddy took us to a White Castle and ordered two hamburgers for each of us. In response to Brian's request for a soda, Daddy said, "You can get a drink at Aunt Margie's house." That night we drove through a snowstorm to visit our cousin Eileen and her family. The snow fell so quickly we had to travel slowly on the road or where Daddy thought the road was. The trip after Ottawa was long, yet there were opportunities to see the sights and curiosities as we traveled down Route 66.

Along the way, we passed the Painted Desert, The Petrified Forest, the meteor crater in Winslow, AZ, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, and Calico, California, a small, well preserved, ghost town just outside of Barstow. We shot past

all of these wonders at 60 miles per hour in our green 1956 Plymouth. As we neared the meteor crater, I mentioned that it was one of the natural wonders of the West. I mentioned that it was a half-mile wide hole in the ground and that it was made before there were any people living in North America. I listed other qualities about this hole in the earth, and Daddy's only response was, "So?" Here, we had an opportunity to see something truly magnificent. Here, we could stop for an hour and explore something of the West, and Daddy could care less that I wanted to do this. I had been leaning forward on my seat as I extolled the virtues of this wonder, and with a single word, it was as if my spirit and spine had turned to jelly and I was slowly sucked into the backseat of the car.

Our ultimate destination was Daddy's brother's house in Tacoma, Washington, where we would spend two and a half weeks in his brother's three-bedroom one bath home. Uncle Dick's family had eleven members, although when we arrived, we learned that Dick was in Japan for one year. There would be fifteen of us sharing a single bathroom. When we left Ottawa, Daddy had a single target in his mind: Uncle Dick's. Nothing along the way could deflect him for his goal.

When we stopped in Barstow, Daddy told us about his early days in the Army. He had been stationed at Fort Irwin at the start of the Second World War, and Barstow was the city all the soldiers would visit on Saturday nights. He said there were dozens of dance halls, many movie theaters, and countless taverns that the soldiers visited by the thousands. The part of Barstow that we pulled into had a dusty motel far from the downtown. A malfunctioning red neon sign on the motel's

roof alternately flashed “vacancy” and “no vacancy” as if it could make up its mind. We dropped off our suitcases, and then Daddy walked us across the highway to a truck-stop restaurant and told us to order hamburgers for dinner. When I looked at the menu, I saw that pork chops and BLTs were the same price as our burgers. We did as we were told. There was no dessert. When we got back to our room, Daddy said we would be on the road at five, as he wanted to be in Oregon by the end of the next day.

Long before dawn, there was a rap on our door and then we heard Daddy’s voice. “Let’s get going.” We rolled out of the bed and one by one headed to the bathroom. At five o’clock in the morning we were standing next to the car waiting for Daddy to open the trunk. Minutes later we headed north on Highway 99 toward the Oregon boarder. As a thin light-blue line began to form on the horizon separating night from day, Daddy pulled into a small gas station and filled up the car. He went inside the station that served as a small grocery store and bought a package of Danish pastries, milk, and filled his thermos with coffee. As the service station attendants finished checking the tires, oil, and gas, Daddy was back in the car barking orders to Mommy about pastries, milk, and coffee. Then we drove, and we drove, and we drove. In the early afternoon we entered Sacramento. The city was shrouded in a dense fog. We passed many state buildings along the way. Mommy said she could see the state capital building in the distance. I looked out and saw two tall trees with orange balls hanging from them. I realized I was looking at orange trees, and I kept my eyes fixed on this sight until they were lost in the

distance in the thick layer of fog. I had never seen a tree with leaves on it in December. Not in Colorado Springs, not in Ottawa, not in East Lansing, not in Lebanon, Missouri. In those places, leaves fall off the trees in late autumn, but here in Sacramento, the trees had leaves and some trees had oranges in the hundreds. I did not say anything about the orange trees as I was too fixated on them and did not want any other voice to ruin how I felt at that moment.

Outside of Sacramento, we stopped for lunch. Daddy told us to order grilled cheese sandwiches. We were back in the car in less than thirty minutes headed to Yreka. Before we got to Yreka, the sun had found the western horizon and the sky had taken on a pink hue. Even the buildings of that city looked a delightful pink as we passed them without stopping. Soon we were in the dark and Daddy had turned on the headlights. Daddy said we would be in Ashland in an hour. As we crossed the boarder between California and Oregon, Mommy cheered our progress for the day. Jeannie, Brian, and I cheered too, not so much because we thought we had accomplished anything, but to support Mommy. A little before seven in the evening, Daddy found a motel and we pulled in there for the night. "I chose this motel," he told Mommy, "because I did not see any advertising for it along the way. Advertising is expensive, and I don't want to pay for that. You get better rates from the guys who don't advertise." We had been sitting in the back of the car for most of fourteen hours that day, and when we got out of the car, our legs felt like the bones had gone away and we wobbled to our motel room. None of us verbalized how we felt, but the sullenness of the moment spoke for us. This motel had a collocated restaurant.

After Daddy looked over the menu, he said we would have the spaghetti dinner. "Five spaghetti dinners, no dessert," he told the waitress.

The next day we were on the road at seven o'clock, and by two in the afternoon we had arrived at Uncle Dick's in Tacoma where fifteen people would share a single toilet. It rained, drizzled, misted, snowed, and rained again everyday. We did manage to get outside for brief intervals to play basketball, but rain usually drove us back into the house within a half hour.

The highlight of our visit was midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. The church was half full, and our two families made up a quarter of the people in attendance. The priest who said Mass had a German shepherd. When the dog crossed the sanctuary, it would genuflect. I had never seen a dog do that. I can't remember the sermon, the color of the priest's hair, or even what vestments he wore, but I can still see that dog, as she would genuflect as she crossed the altar.

On January 2, 1961 we flew to Anchorage on a chartered DC-7. After a two-day layover, we boarded another plane and flew to Fairbanks. The weather in Tacoma when we left was fifty degrees with drizzle. When we arrived in Fairbanks, it was twenty below zero with flurries. While we walked through the airport, Daddy said he had heard that the bishop for this part of Alaska was also in the airport, and he wanted to get his Apostolic Blessing for the family. Soon enough, he found the man himself. The bishop wore an enormous parka and had a red beanie on his head. Daddy addressed him as "Your Excellency," and asked for his blessing. The bishop reached out his hand and on that hand was a large gold ring with a stone the size of

a Concord grape. Daddy knelt down on one knee and grabbed the bishop's hand and kissed the ring. Mommy did the same thing, then Jeannie, then me. Brian had been chewing a piece of bubble gum because his ears had popped during our descent into Fairbanks, and before he kissed the ring, he removed the gum from his hand and then grabbed Bishop's hand and kissed it while holding his bubble gum in the other hand. Judged by his Excellency's reaction, this seemed to have been a first for the bishop. He then gave us a blessing and was on his way. Our sponsor met us at the airport and took us to the visitor's quarters where we stayed for two days until our home at Fort Wainwright was made ready. The following Monday, I started the second half of the eighth grade at Aurora Junior High School.

## Part III

North to Alaska

### 30

The big toe on each of my feet had gone numb.

Daddy walked Brian and me to school on our first day at Aurora Junior High. Even though we wore gloves and heavy coats, we did not have hats or scarves to protect our necks, faces, and ears from the cold. We lived less than a half mile from the school, but by the time we arrived both of us had a mild case of frostbite on the tips of our ears.

We had had cold days in Missouri, but compared to the Fairbanks' weather, those were balmy-almost hedonistically warm-days at fifteen degrees above zero. When we left the house, the weatherman said it was minus twenty outside. The snow under our feet made crunching sounds as we walked on it. Unlike snow we had seen in Missouri and Michigan, the snow here had a blue cast to it. This made it feel colder than twenty below. As the three of us crunched across the snow toward the school, Daddy asked, "Will you be able to find your way home tonight after school?" Brian and I looked at each other, hoping the other guy would have the right answer. Daddy added, "The reason I ask is because when you get out of school, it will be dark. The sun sets here at three." Brian and I began to pay close attention to

how many roads we crossed, names of streets, and any other landmarks we could see.

Alaska was the land of extremes. It was twenty below outside, but nearly eighty above inside. That hundred-degree temperature swing quickly began to thaw my toes, my ears, and the tip of my nose. I began to feel a sharp tingling sensation in my toes almost like they had fallen asleep, and now the blood was rushing back into them. I knew that the next day I would be wearing at least two pairs of socks to keep my feet warm. An office worker escorted us to our classrooms after Daddy registered us for school. I went to Mr. Walker's classroom.

He introduced me to my classmates, and as he did, I felt as if thirty sets of eyeballs were fondling every portion of my body. I was in the beginning stages of developing acne and had become acutely aware of my receding jawline. I could feel the eyes of each student in the class evaluating me. I had a very low opinion of myself; I felt it natural that others would hold the same opinion of me. Fortunately, Mr. Walker's introduction lasted less than ten seconds and then I was told to grab an empty desk. Mr. Walker continued his biology lecture.

At St. Thomas and St. Francis, students never changed classrooms, and there were no specialized teachers for each course of instruction. That changed when I transferred to Aurora Junior High. Mr. Walker finished his lecture, and a new teacher, a man with salt and pepper hair in a crew cut, more fashionable on a teenager than on a man of fifty, came in to teach. Before Mr. Walker left, he told me to see him at lunchtime, so he could go over my class schedule with me. My next



class was Grammar, followed by History. With each change of class there came a change of teacher. The day's final classes were Arithmetic, PE and, Literature. Mr. Walker returned to the classroom to teach Literature.

When I met up with Mr. Walker at lunchtime, he told me that there was a Spanish class offered at the same time as the Grammar class. He said he had looked at my report card from St. Francis and noted that I had been taking Spanish. I did not mention to him that Daddy had Jeannie, Brian, and me study Spanish all summer long. He said I could go into the Spanish class or stay in the Grammar class. He told me to think about it, and then I could choose.

On our walk home, Brian told me Mr. Schneider had introduced him to the class as Bryant Heanth. "Well, it probably wasn't his fault that he mispronounced my name. It looked to me like someone had broken Mr. Schneider's nose a long time ago because the bottom part of it was now a good inch and a half off center, and smooshed up against his face." Brian too was surprised that each course of instruction had a different teacher. We both thought this was a good idea, because it gave us a better chance of getting a good teacher instead of being stuck with one we did not like as we had been back in Lebanon with Sister Matthew. To stay warm on the way home, we ran most of the way. This was no easy feat as we both carried an armload of books and papers, but running did keep us warm even though it was much warmer at the end of the school day. The temperature had risen to minus seven degrees. Our classmates called the day "tropical!"

Mommy had cocoa waiting for us when we got home. Brian and I made a small pile of toast with cinnamon on it and proceeded to the basement where we consumed half a dozen pieces of cinnamon toast and several cups each of cocoa while we worked on our first day's homework. After dinner and the dishes, we returned to the basement to study. At eight o'clock that night, Daddy came downstairs to announce, "Bedtime!" We had not gone to bed this early since third grade, if ever. Arguing with Daddy was futile. He had made up his mind that this was now our bedtime.

When I got into bed, I had my history book under my pillow. The hall light was left on. I waited until I could hear Daddy snoring before I got the history book out. Then I moved down to the end of the bed where with the aid of the hall light, I was just able to read the assignment for the next day. By ten I had finished all of my reading.

The next day when it was time for the Grammar class, Mr. Walker asked me if I wanted to go to the Spanish class. I said I did, and he dismissed five of us from his class, so we could go to Miss Wellman's Spanish class. This class was held in a small room next to the faculty lunchroom. There were ten of us in the classroom. We sat around a large rectangular table. When our group walked in, the other students were talking about the test that they were going to take on this day. No one seemed to notice that I had joined the group until one of the students said, "Are you Tim?" I told her I was, and she handed me a book called *Vamos a Hablar*. "This is your textbook. We're on chapter seven. We started it last week. The test we are going to

take is only a practice one. We have two more weeks on this chapter, but Miss Wellman wants to make sure we are all studying.” I thanked her for the book at about the same time Miss Wellman came into the room. She was without a doubt the prettiest teacher I had ever seen. She was tall, thin, had raven hair, and a shape that aroused every boy in the school. She introduced me to the class. I was able to keep up with my classmates on the first day, because Daddy had had us listen and study all forty lessons of the *Living Language* in Spanish the entire summer before eighth grade. Jeannie studied along with us. We did not understand the rules very well, but we had excellent Spanish accents. I could trill my Rs like a Castilliano. It was this mock skill that permitted me to remain with the group as most of them spoke Spanish as if it were a dialect of English, seemingly unaware of the trilling and lipping necessary in good Spanish. The first thing I read to Miss Wellman was “Puede usted decirme, donde esta el restaurante?” Even Duckworth, clearly the smartest kid in the school, could not match my pronunciation ability, and I gained a measure of respect and acceptance from him even though he out scored me on every test by no less than ten points. What mattered to him was that I sounded right, even if I could not remember how to conjugate *estar* in the future tense. Miss Wellman told Mr. Walker that I could stay with her class, and in this manner I avoided eighth grade Grammar.

I had never had a physical education class in all my years in the Catholic school system, but every day at Saint Francis, we played softball as long as the weather permitted. When the snow came, we would create a field of play and

engage in dare-base during lunch recess. At Aurora, there was a real gymnasium with basketball hoops, mats for wrestling, and on the outer edge of the basketball court the coach had us run in groups of four. It was during our wrestling instruction, that I realized I was stronger than most of the boys in the class. I also learned that you could not tell by looking at someone if you were a better wrestler than the other person. Boys that I thought were much better than I was at wrestling were often very easily pinned. In the gym class, I was never pinned even though I lost matches on something called "control." One student in the class was Mike Fox. We had become friends during our PE class, and when the wrestling season began, Mike and I would practice with each other. I liked Mike because he was funny, and he was even more average looking than I was. He had a funny accent that almost sounded like he came from the South, but he denied ever having been there. One day we were wrestling with each other, and while I knew that I was the better wrestler, I could never pin him. Several times during our mock match, he actually managed to get me on my back, and the referee's hand hit the mat twice before I managed to wriggle free. Mike never gave up. Relentlessly, he kept coming at me, and ultimately, our match ended in a draw. When we finished our match and we were sitting on the edge of the mats supposedly watching the other boys wrestle, I asked him how he managed to do so well. His answer shocked me. "I knew you did not respect my wrestling ability. I knew you underestimated my strength, and I used that against you and came within one slap on the mat of beating you." I had never before in my life heard such honesty from anyone, and I told Mike that he was

my friend, and we shook on that. For several weeks we were best friends, until one day, he came to school and told us all that his dad had orders, and he would be gone at the end of the week. The following week when I went to school, I looked for Mike, but I never saw him again. I had never made such a good friend so quickly, and just as I was getting to know him, he was gone. The Army had moved his dad to Fort Ord, California.

School was more fun at Fort Wainwright than it had been for me at the other schools. I had almost no friends, but the classes that I took were of greater interest to me. Mr. Walker's Biology class had depth to it. We discussed evolution, sex, death, the scientific organization of life, and so many more topics that piqued my eighth grader's imagination. My Spanish class involved conversation so Spanish was not something to memorize as much as it was a way to converse with others. All of my previous schooling just seemed like an endless list of things to know but there was no depth to it. Contributing to my enjoyment of school was the school library. At Saint Francis, Sister Annunciata and before her, Sister Matthew, would assign us book reports as a part of our English studies. Our school library consisted mostly of books by Bobbs-Merrill and those were almost entirely books on the lives of saints. These books were sixty to eighty pages long and by the time I was in eighth grade, I could read one of them on the round trip down Route 66 to and from Fort Leonard Wood.

Our library at Aurora had thousands of books, and the first books that caught my eye were those of Jules Verne. My first book report was *Twenty Thousand*

*Leagues Under the Sea*. I chose this book because I wanted to know how someone could travel 20,000 leagues under a body of water that was only at best one to two leagues deep. The opening of the book, set during the American Civil War, captivated me, and I was sad when I reached the final page. For my Literature class, Mr. Walker made a number of corrections to my writing, but encouraged me to keep reading such books. By the end of the school year I had also read *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *Six Weeks in a Balloon*. It was the never-ending adventure of being free to do as one wished that propelled my reading and for several years, I schemed how to sail away in a balloon to anywhere that I wanted to go. I enjoyed Mr. Walker's Literature class, and the possibilities it exposed me to as I poured over the pages written by great authors.

The greatest curriculum change came in my history class. My previous exposure to history was through a Roman Catholic bias. Parochial school indoctrination had convinced me that Catholics had done everything that was now considered good or famous in the world. Louis Pasteur was a Catholic, as was Columbus, and John Barry the Father of the U.S. Navy. The list of great Catholic historical figures was extensive. At Aurora, I read about the American Civil War, and for the first time, I learned that black people were slaves and not just people who could handle the heat and humidity of the South and thus were brought there to work. There were a great many history books in the library, and I began to work through the stacks stuffing facts and figures into my mind if not quite comprehending the forces that impelled the historical narrative. History became my

favorite subject along with PE. I missed my friends in Lebanon, but I realized that this move exposed me to ideas and places that the Lebanon experience could never duplicate.

## 31

Mommy began to not feel well shortly after we arrived in the Fairbanks area. She went to see the doctors on the post, but they said she was just having a reaction to the local water. Many people new to Alaska had difficulty in adjusting they told her. A few weeks later, late January, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. The hospital at Fort Wainwright could not do the operation, and Mommy would have to go the Fort Richardson for her operation. A few days later, Mommy and Daddy left for Anchorage, and for the first time in our lives, Jeannie, Brian, and I were alone. We maintained our daily routines, but Jeannie now cooked our meals when she got home from school, and Brian and I folded and put away all the laundry. Because Jeannie cooked our meals, she did not have to do dishes. Brian and I now became the sole dishwashers in the house. It was not a disagreeable task and we strived each night to take less and less time with this chore. Our only argument was who would take out the trash. In late January, the outside air temperature in the evening approached forty below. I got even days for this assignment.

A couple of days after Mommy and Daddy left, Daddy called to tell us that the surgeon had removed a thirteen pound tumor from Mommy, and that she would be in the hospital for two weeks recovering. Daddy would stay in Anchorage for

several more days. He would return to Anchorage to get Mommy when the doctors said she could come home.

The day Mommy and Daddy left, Jeannie received a catalog from Mount Saint Scholastica College. I recalled the first day at Michigan State when Daddy came home from work. That was the day he told all three of us that we were going to go to college. At the time, I did not understand what college was; I just knew that it was where I was going to go one day. That night while the others slept and my parents were away in Anchorage, I went down to the basement and read Jeannie's college catalog. I was pleased that I could read the text without trouble. I thought you had to be very smart to go to college. I had always been told I was an idiot or some variant of that word by Daddy, and I received little support from elsewhere that might support some other view of me.

In the dark-of-night, I read a college catalog, and I understood it. I began to look at the various things that a person could study in college such as Biology, History, Zoology, and so on. I read the course description that followed the course title, and began to think of myself in a college classroom studying these subjects. The seed that was planted in my mind long before suddenly was nourished by the catalog my sister received in the mail. I began to fantasize about being in college and away from home. I began to fantasize about being free from my family. My path away from the control I so wretched at was now right in front of me. All I needed to do was to follow that path.



Mommy came home after being hospitalized for two weeks. She was very weak, and for many weeks, she could not cook or do housework. The three of us took on those responsibilities. We enjoyed contributing to making the household run smoothly, but there were no complaints from us kids the day Mommy said, "I will cook the dinner tonight."

## 32

Not long after our arrival at Fort Wainwright, Brian and I joined the Boy Scout Troop on the post. Unlike our scoutmaster at Fort Leonard Wood, Paul Messick, the scoutmaster we encountered at Fort Wainwright, was severe and humorless. The boys in the troop, on the other hand, were far more gregarious than the scoutmaster, and we soon felt like we belonged to our new troop. The first night we attended a meeting we learned two new terms, cheechako and sourdough. Boys who had not yet camped out during the winter in Alaska were called cheechakoes, and boys who were experienced with the Alaskan winter were grizzled old sourdoughs. The troop was planning a camp out in February, and any boy attending would earn a badge that declared him a sourdough. Brian and I were up for this challenge. By the time I left Missouri, I had attained the rank of Star Scout, and on my first night with my new troop I was told I would be the Troop Treasurer.

I took home the Troop recall roster the scoutmaster had given me and the next day began to call all the boys in the troop who owed dues. It turned out that many boys who owed money were no longer living in Alaska as their dads had been

transferred elsewhere. Some boys said that they no longer belonged to the troop while others promised to pay at the next meeting. One young man, David Trigo, said over the phone, "Look here, Tim, I really don't go to the Boy Scouts. It was the only way that I could get my old man to let me out of the house on a school night. If you won't tell that I don't go, I will bring you the money I owe tonight." Ten minutes later, came a desperate knock on the door, and there in front of me stood David Trigo. He reeked of cigarettes and there was a hint of alcohol on his breath. He was shorter than I expected. He was at best five feet four inches tall. He had a glassy look in his eyes when he said, "Here's the money. Call me in a couple of months and I will give you the next dues. Don't tell my dad." Then he shoved a five-dollar bill into my hand, and left. At the next scout meeting, I turned in all the money I had collected during the week plus the current week's dues. There was about twenty dollars. When the scoutmaster saw the sum, he asked what I had done to collect so much money, and I told him that I just called everyone on the list who owed money. I did not tell him about David Trigo. He said, "Good job."

We spent the next two meetings planning for the camp out that was now billed as the "Winter Jamboree." We were given a list of clothes and other items to bring. Daddy had acquired surplus army sleeping bags for Brian and me. Daddy said, "These sleeping bags are the old type. We used this type in Korea until one night a small squad of Chinese soldiers slipped into one of our camps and killed about forty G. I.s in their sleep; because they could not get out of their bags fast enough to get their rifles. But you won't need to be getting out of your bags in a

hurry, so these will do for camping.” In the sanctuary of our bedroom, Brian and I discussed the possibility that our sleeping bags might have belonged to one of those unfortunate soldiers.

Each patrol in the troop bought its own food for the campout. Each group of boys would need enough food to carry them through from Saturday morning until noon on Sunday. Our dining interest ranged from hamburger, chicken legs, spam, eggs, powdered milk, jelly, peanut butter, bread, bacon, cans of bean, carrots, string beans, soup, Oreo cookies, graham crackers, and packets of instant cocoa. Always, though, the most important concern when shopping for grub remained cost. On the day of the campout, we went out in groups of two on a five-mile hike. The starting point was the Boy Scout building. Our destination was an undisclosed site that could only be found if we followed the instructions we were given and properly utilized a compass and map. My group went out second. We were told to leave our food and bedding behind. These items would be brought to the campsite later. We left the Boy Scout building and walked to the road in front of the building as the instructions indicated. We turned right, given as a magnetic heading, and walked for a mile down the road and turned to the right again. This right turn was also given as a magnetic heading. We followed the puzzling instructions for about two hours when at last we arrived at a spot in the forest marked by our troop’s Boy Scout flag. Standing nearby was the scoutmaster. The first group of boys to leave for the hike arrived just as we did but from a different direction. All four of us were looking at our scoutmaster and wondering how he had arrived on this spot before us. With his

thumb, he pointed to something behind him. We looked in the distance, and through the snow-covered limbs of the pine forest we could see our Boy Scout building. "We set this up so you'd walk in a big circle, but never be far from the building in case some of you got lost," he said adding, "You should start making your lean-tos and fire-pits. It's twenty below and going to get colder without a fire."

My partner and I made our lean-to quickly. For flooring, we used tender branches from the plentiful, nearby pine trees. We tromped the fifty yards to the building to retrieve our food and bedding. Our next task was to build a fire. We made a clearing by removing as much of the snow from a small circular area as possible. We situated the fire pit about five feet from our lean-to, so that the heat it generated would help to keep us warm in the lean-to. Then we began to collect tinder and firewood. Soon, we had an impressive fire roaring in our fire pit. We found logs to sit on and moved them near our fire and began to enjoy how our fire diminished the chill air of the arctic north.

We made several trips into the forest gathering firewood. When I came back from one of these trips, I saw that Brian and his partner had arrived, but Brian had stripped off his coat, shirt, and undershirt and now paraded around in only his mukluks and overhalls. On his head he wore an Army surplus winter hat, the kind with wooly flaps that could have covered his ears. Instead of having the flaps down to warm his ears, the flaps were up about two-thirds of the way making them appear more like limp wings incapable of flight than a device designed for warmth. The cold had chased all the warming blood away from his exposed skin which as I

looked at it reminded me of the skin of a frozen chicken that Mommy was thawing out in warm water in the sink. His flabby white belly stuck out over his trousers. In his hand, he held a book of matches, and he was trying to light one of them. His hands trembled so much from the chills, that he could not extract the match, and instead he wandered about his fire-pit almost as if he were in a trance.

I dropped my bundle of firewood and told Brian he was suffering from hypothermia. As I reached him, I grabbed the matches from his hand and escorted him to his lean-to and sleeping bag. "Take off your boots, and get into your sleeping bag," I told him. I knew from his response how grave his situation had become. Generally, any order I gave Brian was followed either by a verbal argument or a physical brawl that ended in a wrestling match between the two of us. Not this time. Brian immediately went to his lean-to and removed his boots and crawled inside the sleeping bag. "Stay there till you're warmed up. Then get some clothes on," I said with a tone of voice of authority and concern.

Once Brian was in his sleeping bag, I went to his fire-pit and lit the fire. In a few minutes, a nice blaze burned there. Brian's hiking partner kept adding firewood to the blaze and soon the heat of the flames reached Brian's face. His look of resignation had given way to a smile.

When he emerged from his cocoon, Brian was fully dressed and lucid. "I was sweating and all my clothes were soaked, so I took off everything to cool down," he told me. Sharply I barked, "You nearly froze out there." That night the scoutmaster told us that anyone who wanted to sleep in the Boy Scout building could do so.

Brian and I and most of the other boys spent the night in the elements. Even though some of us had committed cheechako sins, we all wanted to pretend at least that we were Sourdoughs. The sleeping bag Daddy had bought me was warm, but just in case, I had brought along the blanket that I had so uncomfortably slept in on my first camp out and all subsequent camp outs including the nights I slept on the chaise lounge in the backyard at Fort Leonard Wood. The old and the new worked well together in keeping me warm that night. Never again, while camping, did I have a sleepless night because of cold.

The next week at our regular meeting, the scoutmaster handed out Sour Dough patches to all the boys who had successfully camped in the chill winter air of Fairbanks, Alaska. We all felt we had achieved something special. The scoutmaster noted that no one had suffered frostbite on the trip.

By May, I had added another six merit badges to my collection, bringing my total to fifteen. I also completed all the requirements for Life Scout, the last step before Eagle Scout. I began to realize that a lot about life was just doing things, even if they were small things like changing light bulbs at home so momma would give me a required signature for my Home Repairs merit badge.

Boy Scouts also offered an opportunity to earn other awards. One of these was a religious award; The Ad Altari Dei Award was created for Catholic boys who achieved certain measures of success within the church. As an altar boy, I had already achieved well over half of the requirements, and upon our arrival in Alaska I began working on the other half of the requirements. Brian was also working on the

requirements for the award. I fulfilled some of these requirements during Holy Week, that period of time between Palm Sunday and Easter. On Holy Thursday, the priest removes the Eucharist from the tabernacle and resituates it on a small table away from the altar. This symbolized the hours that Jesus spent praying before his arrest. A single candle is left to burn in front of the place that the Eucharist rests. After the service was over, I went home with my parents, but around midnight, I went back to the church to complete one of the requirements for the medal.

When this ceremony first began in the Middle Ages, I imagined that many people flocked to the church all night long to pray for whatever it was that people prayed for back then, but on this night from midnight until well past four in the morning I was the only person in the church, and I was there only to accomplish the requirements of a medal. When I arrived home, Daddy was up. He always rose at four-thirty even on the weekends. He had a pot of coffee brewing. I asked him why no one else was at church, and he told me because, "Most people were too tired to go to church late at night unlike long ago when people did not work as hard as people do nowadays." Innocently, I accepted that as the reason as I stumbled toward my bed.

## 33

In early May, there was still snow in our front yard, but by the last week of the month, it seemed like nature had turned on a switch that prompted all the trees to burst into greenery. In a fortnight, our front yard went from dog poop covered

slush to green grass in need of mowing. This sudden change in weather brought an unfamiliar Alaskan phenomenon--mosquitoes. Thick, black clouds of these pests raged around the housing area seeking exposed human skin. Long-term residents of the area told stories about people walking out to their cars to fetch something and getting caught in a cloud of these bugs and coming back inside needing a transfusion. The mosquitoes I saw were close to an inch in length with wings as long as their bodies making for an enormous wingspan of nearly two inches. Shortly after the appearance of the first mosquitoes came the first songbirds that quickly began to gorge on these pests. Within a few weeks, the amorphous clouds of bugs were gone and life in the out-of-doors was rather pleasant.

Graduation from eighth grade occurred in late May. My last graduation was from Miss Wellman's Kindergarten class eight years earlier. All I recalled of that ceremony was that all the other children had a gift for their mothers. Miss Wellman had given each of us a flower seed to plant in a coffee can full of dirt. She had used a church key can opener to make holes in the bottom of our coffee cans so the water could drain out of them. Then she sent us outdoors to fill our cans with dirt. Finally, we made a small hole in the center of the dirt where we then put the seed. All of the other children had a beautiful zinnia growing in their coffee can. Each plant put forth lovely flowers that the other children would offer their mothers on that graduation day. A few days after planting my seed, I saw nothing growing. Impatiently, I grubbed through the dirt looking for my seed so I could ask it what it was doing. In the confused handfuls of dirt I dug out of the can, I never found my



seed. Even weeks after everyone else had a beautiful plant emerge, I did not tell Miss Wellman what I had done. On graduation day, I went into the schoolyard and found a dandelion growing. I dug it up, and put it in my coffee can and offered this to Mommy hoping she would not compare what I had done with the beautiful flowers the other mothers received. She told me she loved her flower very much.

The seventh grade class put together the graduation program for the eighth graders. It was printed on purple paper and on the cover was a stylized picture of an aurora made with glue and glitter. "They had a debate today about who was to be on the honor roll for graduation," Brian said.

"Who had an argument?" I asked.

"The eighth grade teachers," he answered. "The last spot was between you and John Sutton."

I had never thought of myself as honor roll material, and in shock, said, "So?"

"Well, Mr. Walker thought you were a better student than John and you had better grades than he had. But other teachers, including Mr. Neisner, said that John had been at Aurora for two years and that he deserved the award more than you."

"So who got it," I asked?

"I don't know. We were told to leave the room before they finished their work," Brian said.

Just before Easter, Daddy had taken me to buy a sports jacket and a new white shirt. My new clothes fit perfectly for Easter morning Mass, and Daddy said I would wear the same outfit to my graduation ceremony in six weeks. When it came

time to dress for the graduation ceremony, I struggled to button the collar, and I noticed that the sleeves on my nearly new white shirt were a good three inches shorter than they had originally been. After I tied my tie, I put on my sports jacket only to discover that the same thing had happened to my new coat. When I got to the bottom of the stairs leading to the first floor of our house, Daddy was the first person to see me, and he began to laugh almost hysterically. "Mayme, come here. You've got to see this," he managed to say in between his gut splitting laughter.

Mommy, Jeannie, and Brian all came to see what Daddy was making such a fuss over. Soon everyone except for me was laughing. I asked, "What?" Brian said, "Go look in the mirror." I went back upstairs to look in the bathroom mirror. To my horror, I saw that the jacket I wore was now considerably smaller than the one I had worn on Easter. I had grown about four inches in the intervening six weeks. No one had noticed this growth, because I walked stooped over.

Daddy said, "When I got the coat, I was afraid this might happen. There is nothing we can do now except to go to the graduation." I rolled my shoulders back a bit, and that helped to make the jacket fit a little better, but I still looked like I was wearing the jacket that belonged to someone considerably smaller than I. I took the jacket off before I got in the car, and thought about leaving it in there for the ceremony, but then I realized I would be the only boy in the class without a jacket. I wore the jacket.

Early in the program each of the ten honor students was introduced to the audience and given a certificate of achievement. I held my breath as each name was

called out. I did not hear my name and immediately a tidal wave of disappointment washed over me. As I looked around, I noticed that most of my classmates could have cared less about this part of the ceremony and soon my spirits were restored. No one knew I was eleventh on the list.

When the graduation ceremony ended, all the parents left their graduating offspring in the care of the eighth grade faculty one final time as we went to a school sponsored graduation dance. For a good part of the evening, most of us stood around while someone played records. After watching for a number of dances, a slow dance was played, and I found the courage to ask Barbara Holper if she would like to dance. And for the next several songs we danced together. I liked Barbara, but I had never talked to her because of shyness and the fact that my acne made my face resembled a bowl of strawberries.

After our fourth dance, I was relaxed enough to ask Barbara about her plans for ninth grade and was she going to go to college. We began to have a real conversation, but all this came to an end when Tommy Hall interrupted our dance and asked Barbara if he could have the next dance. I was crushed when she said "yes." Soon after that dance, I left the party mostly because I believed I could not compete with someone who had no acne and was four inches taller than I.

Mommy and Jeannie had waited up for me. I told them about the dance and how much fun I had and how much I liked Barbara Holper, but how someone else took her away. Mommy was very consoling and reassuring as all mothers must be with their ugly duckling. As I headed up the stairs to go to bed, I heard Jeannie in a

near whisper say to Mommy, “Timmy’s taste is all in his mouth.” I thought about her remark as I trudged to the top of the stairs. I could not recall a single date Jeannie had had in grade school or high school. I went into my bedroom where my brother slept. I wept silently, but I did not know why.

A few weeks after my graduation, we were eating our lunch when the phone rang. Mommy answered it. It was Daddy. He had just seen the promotion list to Sergeant Major, and his name was on it. Mommy was thrilled as were all of us. By the time Daddy came home, there was more news for the family. There was no position available at Fairbanks that called for a Sergeant Major, but at Fort Richardson near Anchorage, there was an opening for a Sergeant Major. We would leave for Anchorage in a couple of weeks. We had not yet been in Alaska six months.

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Mommy seemed to find new energy with this news. In part, some of her energy might have come from the twenty hours of daylight we were experiencing in the land of the midnight sun. All of our furniture was government-issued, as it was cheaper for the Army to clean and reuse furniture than to haul a soldier’s belongings thousands of miles to the wasteland of Fairbanks. Having only books and six hundred pounds of personal property, the movers were in and out of our house in two hours. We carried with us only a suitcase each as we headed down the Sterling Highway from Fairbanks to Anchorage and Fort Richardson. On the day we left,

Daddy had us all go to Mass, even though it was a Monday, and then after the Mass, the priest gave us all a blessing for a safe trip. We were on the road 9 o'clock.

Mommy began to set up house almost the instant we moved into our house on Fort Richardson. She went to the housing office and picked out curtains, and furniture for our house. She had her own doilies and other kinds of decorations and knick-knacks. These were sprinkled about the house to give it the appearance of being ours. The first dinner she made was pork chops with applesauce. She chopped up onions and garlic and tossed them into a skillet and let them cook until they turned the color of caramel. Then in another skillet, she slowly braised inch thick pork chops that she had dusted with herbs. She cooked these until the rinds of fat turned a golden brown, then she added the onions and garlic and let all the flavors blend together. We had twice baked potatoes and a green salad to go with the chops that night.

I compared this first night to the first night in Fort Leonard Wood where after an arduous day of packing, cleaning, and moving, Mommy had to cook dinner because Daddy did not want us to eat meat on Friday. I compared the calm of this night to the frenzy of that night, and I wondered why we would want to live any other way than the way we lived on this night, our first night at Fort Richardson.

We lived in a fourplex. Daddy was the senior ranking enlisted person in the complex, and he was responsible for seeing that everyone had their lawn mowed, dog poop cleaned up from their yard, and that no one engaged in obnoxious behavior. Our next-door neighbor, First Sergeant Vaughn was Daddy's right hand

man for these duties. He would come over to our house and comment on the appearance of the units in our complex and their lawns. He and Daddy would go out several times a month to inspect the appearance of all the units along Richardson Drive where we lived.

It was Brian's job to mow the lawn and trim the yard. He used the power mower that Daddy had purchased from Sears while he worked at the Frandor Shopping Center Sears store. I had also used the lawnmower to mow some of our neighbor's lawns for money. It was the first money I ever earned. Daddy never suspected that I used his lawn mower. He would have been outraged to learn of my enterprising ways. Initiative without Daddy's imprimatur was anathema in our family. Even though the sun shown for many hours a day in the Anchorage area, the grass did not grow as fast as the grass in Missouri or Michigan. Brian mowed the lawn every Thursday about an hour before Daddy came home. He would be brushing the grass off the mower when Daddy pulled up to the house. Brian knew that Daddy would be impressed to see him working on the yard when he came home. Daddy rarely yelled at Brian about the yard.

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During the summer, Jeannie found as many babysitting jobs as possible. She worked during the day as a nanny for a family with four children. Almost every night, she would babysit for people who wanted to go out to dinner or to a movie. She saved this money for her college fund. The priest at the post church hired her to

run the church choir, and on Sunday mornings; Jeannie would lead the choir singing hymns before, during, and after Mass. There were a number of discussions between Jeannie and Daddy about money for college, and at the end of these conversations, Jeannie often went to her bedroom and shut the door. After a few minutes, Mommy would go to Jeannie's room, and they would talk, but always behind closed doors. When Jeannie emerged she would wear a different attitude on her face, a cheerful face, but she was not happy with the things Daddy had to say to her about money for college.

Brian and I had a lot of free time that summer, and we began going to gym every day. There was a pool there, and we used it a lot. One day we saw a poster that advertised a Boy Scout Troop on the post. It gave the dates that this troop would sponsor instruction for the Life Saving merit badge. We had been living in a state of torpor since we left Fort Wainwright. This bulletin sparked us into action. We signed up for the lessons.

The Life Saving class took place over a two-week period. We started with a group of eleven boys, but within a few days that number dropped to six. Larry Hopkins and his brother, Archie, took lessons with us. They were also scouts in the troop that we would join when the summer ended. Our instructor was a lifeguard at the pool, and unlike our teacher at Fort Leonard Wood, he did not threaten to drown us or bully us in any way. At the beginning of the course, he gave us a booklet that described everything that we needed to know and to accomplish by the time we reached the end of the course. None of the tasks seemed difficult except the 1000-

yard swim requirement and the removal of our clothes while underwater. I recalled how clothing removal had terrified me back at Fort Leonard Wood not so much because it was difficult or dangerous, but because this was how my friend Dickie Dawson had died when he was ten years old. Some instructor did not pay attention to his boys while they performed this rather easy drill, and Dickey became tangled in his pants and shirt and ran out of air while underwater and drowned in full sight of at least twenty other people. As I removed my pants and shirt, I thought of my friend Dickey and wondered if it would happen to me.

At the end of each session, our instructor would have us swim eight laps of the Olympic-size pool. We had two sessions a day. When a session ended, Brian and I would swim extra laps. We practiced all of the techniques we had learned each using the other as the “drowning victim.” On the last day of the course, we had to demonstrate how to rescue someone who was larger than us and drowning. For this exercise, our instructor jumped into the deep end of the pool, and one-by-one made each of us rescue him. The technique he had taught us was to approach the individual from the front and calm him down by telling him we were there to help. As we approached the swimmer in distress, we were to be prepared to dive under the water if the drowning person tried to grasp us or pull us under the water. As each of us made our approach, our instructor grabbed for each one of us. When he grabbed at me, I just plunged under the water and came up from behind him. I placed my right arm across his chest and tilted him upward so that he would now be in the floating position, then I side stroked to the edge of the pool. When Archie’s



turn came, he was not quite as fortunate as the rest of us in executing this maneuver, and he was nearly drowned by the instructor not once, not twice, but three times, never achieving success in the rescue technique. The rest of us managed to rescue our drowning swimmer bringing him to the safety of the edge of the pool.

Our final test was the 1000-yard swim. We needed to swim twenty laps of the pool. We all leapt into the pool using the Australian Racing Dive. I alternated between a free style crawl and the sidestroke as I ticked off one lap after another. In less than thirty-five minutes most of us emerged from the pool exhausted but elated over our achievement. We wrapped ourselves in our towels and watched as Archie finished his final laps. Archie struggled like a drowning cat in a river splashing up geysers of water all around him in uneven strokes more akin to thrashing than swimming. Then he seemed to have figured something out. Once he got into shallow water, he began to run through the water. He did this for at least the last six laps. The instructor must not have seen him doing this, because when he returned to the pool he asked Archie "How many laps?" and he replied "Eighteen." When Archie crawled out of the pool, he rolled over on his back like a beached whale and laid there for several minutes his blubbery gut rising and falling with each breath. The instructor signed off all of our requirements, and gave us our merit badge cards to turn in to our troop. He told Archie to see him the next day, and they would work together on his rescue technique.

Behind our housing area ran a small river called Ship Creek. We had heard that beavers lived in the river and had built a dam. Jeannie, Brian, and I decided to

see for ourselves if this were true. About ten that morning, we walked out the front door of our house and began to follow Richardson Drive making a right hand turn at Seventh Street and followed it until we came to the Glenn Highway. We picked up a dirt path that angled sharply downward toward the creek. We were going to follow the creek as it meandered toward its source in the Chugach Mountains, however we had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when Brian shouted, "I see the den. The beavers' dam is over there," now pointing to a small hill of sticks and mud that stood out of the water at least five feet. Then we saw beavers swimming in the pool created by their den. As they approached the dam, they would dive below the water presumably to go into their den. We watched their activity for over an hour. We watched as one maneuvered a limb into place on the den. We watched another gnaw at the base of a tree, and while it did not fell the tree as we watched, it made great progress toward accomplishing its objective.

Jeannie asked, "How far do you think those mountains are from here?" looking in the direction of the Chugach Mountains.

"I think they are maybe a mile or two from here," said Brian.

Then Jeannie said, "Let's walk to the base of the mountains, and maybe we could even climb them once we get there." I felt like we were being led by Dorothy of Oz. Brian and I were the Tin Man and the Scarecrow now following the Yellow Brick Road as Jeannie then led us on this excursion. We walked for over an hour through the swamp created by the beaver dam and did not seem an inch closer to the base of the mountains than we did when we stood near the beaver dam. Finally, we found a

dirt road, and we continued our trek on it toward the base of the Chugach. It was not long before an MP in a truck stopped to ask us who we were and “what in the hell” we were doing out in no man’s land? Jeannie told him, “We are going to walk to the top of those mountains,” as she pointed to massive range in front of us.

“I don’t think so,” said the MP. “Those mountains are about ten miles from here, and after that, a good climber would need a day to get to the top. How’s about I give you kids a ride back to your house.” In bitter disappointment, we abandoned our quest to climb the Chugach. Instead we hopped into the bed of his pickup truck and like captured bandits we were ignominiously hauled back to civilization and the sharp tongue of our mother who was frantic over the nearly four hour disappearance of her three children.

“Mommy, we were all right and never in any danger,” Jeannie explained, but Mommy was very upset over our disappearance and for the rest of the afternoon, we tried to soothe her feelings. Finally, the three of us cornered her and promised that we would never go off again without first telling her where we were going and when we would be back. Then we promised to stay in the house the rest of the day and even cook dinner, which we did. By the time Daddy came home, Mommy’s mood had begun to change. She came to us and said, “You children are my life. I do not know what I would do if I lost you. I do not know if I could go on if something happened to any of you. Please, never, ever, do this again.” There were tears in her eyes, and we all gave her a hard hug and promised to never do this again.

The summer vacation ended with Jeannie boarding an airplane and flying off to her freshman year of college at Mount Saint Scholastica College. I felt a terrible sense of loss as the wheels of the plane left the runway. She had been my confidant, my best critic, and my advisor. I did not always agree with what she did or said, but at least she pointed out the paths available in life, and allowed me to make my own selection. Now, I was on my own. Worse, I thought, maybe Brian would expect me to provide him guidance, and my compass was broken.

## 36

We walked to our new school, Arcturus Junior High School, on the first day of class. I started ninth grade, Brian eighth. When we arrived at the school, the doors were locked, and a large crowd of eager students stood on the steps of the school. Someone inside the building unlocked the doors to the cheers of those waiting outside. Mommy had registered us for our classes the week before, and we had a schedule that listed the classes, times, and rooms. My first class was Algebra. Almost from the beginning, Mr. Nash, the Algebra teacher, seemed to be speaking a foreign tongue. He talked about axioms, multiplicative inverses, and then did a magic problem on the board where he wrote a bunch of negative numbers (some in brackets) and ended up with an answer that was a positive number. I struggled mightily in this course, and studied it the most. The result after a full year was a D.

My final class each day was World History. Miss Lemos taught this class. She also taught my second period Spanish class. In her history class, I made perfect

scores on nearly all of the tests. In the final quarter of the year, she asked me to stay after class one day. "I would like you to help me with my grading. I will give you all the weekly tests on Friday, and you will take them home and grade them. On Monday, you will give the tests back to me with the scores clearly marked on the front page of each test." I eagerly accepted the assignment. There was no money or other form of compensation. I saw this as an honor and faithfully completed my assignment each week.

I did not know why facts, names, dates, and events in history came to me so easily. I tried often to see if I could apply my understanding of history to Algebra, but there seemed to be no correlation between the two subjects. Even Daddy tried to help me with my Algebra problems. One day at breakfast, he said, "I am coming home for lunch today. Your mother will be gone to the doctors with your brother. I'd like to work with you on your Algebra, so make sure you bring your book home." I was elated. Daddy had worked with Jeannie on her Trigonometry, and she had made an A in that class. She made the National Honor Society. I was honored that Daddy wanted to help me with my math.

When I arrived home for lunch that day, Daddy had made Campbell's Tomato Soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for me. "Dig in," he said. Then he began to look over my Algebra book and asked what chapter we were working on. Then he went to that chapter and began to silently read. I finished my soup and sandwich and carried my dishes to the sink where I washed them and put them away. Daddy asked me to sit down with him, and we began to go over the assignment for the day.

At first, I was able to answer Daddy's questions, but as he asked more and more questions, I had fewer and fewer answers for him. We were working in the chapter called "Sentences in Two Variables." Daddy read one of the problems, and I seemed not to understand the question, so Daddy worked the problem. When I saw the problem worked, I understood what Daddy had done, but had no understanding of how to duplicate what he had done. Then he selected the next problem and asked me to work it. I spent several minutes trying various solutions, but none of them seemed to work. Then Daddy said, "Let me show you how simple this is." He worked the problem with ease deriving the correct answer in seconds. I noticed how neat his numbers were on the page, and how bold and firm was his writing. Then he gave me another problem to solve. This time I failed to even get the problem on the paper, because I was not sure what the problem was asking. "You stay here and solve the problem. I'm going to wash up and go back to work," he said as he left the dinner table where we worked on my Algebra.

I read and reread the problem many times. I wrote down some numbers on my scratch paper, but soon scratched them out and wrote new numbers. I noticed how sloppy my numbers were compared to how neat Daddy's were, and wondered if that might be the problem. I needed to write legibly. I was on perhaps my fifth attempt at solving the problem, when suddenly I heard a loud explosion, and saw stars in my field of vision. As this sensation passed, I realized I was sprawled out on the floor, and standing over me was my father. His face was crimson, his mouth was contorted into a raging scream, and he was pointing his finger with me. For several

more seconds, I could not hear anything he said, then I began to hear his voice as he let loose with a barrage of expletives that must have been handed to him by Satan himself. “Stupiduselessmotherfuckingbastardpieceofshitworthlessworm sonofabitchgoddamnworthlessfool...” As I rose and ran to the stairs, he chased after me and kicked me in the behind as I mounted the steps to the second floor of our house. Never once did he take a breath of air as he exhaled this corrosive screed of words as vile as black widow venom on the soul. I went to the bathroom and washed my face. There was a hand imprint on the right side of my face, and within the right ear, there was a ringing sensation that would never go away. While in the bathroom, I planned my escape in case Daddy came after me again. I would run out the front door and down the street toward the school. I wished Mommy had not taken Brian to the doctors. I crept down the stairs, looking for Daddy, but when I got to the bottom of the staircase, I heard his car start out in the parking lot behind our house. I picked up my chair that had been overturned as I flew from it after being struck. I took my Algebra book upstairs, and then left for school still smarting from being struck. That night at dinner, Daddy did not say anything about hitting me, and I did not tell Mommy or anyone. I knew I was living with a ticking time bomb that could go off at anytime.

Each night during the week, I spent three to five hours studying my schoolwork, but with few exceptions, achieved only mediocre grades for my effort. I found this odd, as my closest friends were several of the smartest boys in the school. Richard Gwinn, Nick Psaki, and Alan Prysok were all my friends, and we would talk

before, during and after school. They were all bright students, if not brilliant.

Richard and I became the best of friends.

He wore glasses and had an eye that was slightly off center when he looked at me. His red hair was indicative of his fiery personality. He had a comment for anything anyone said, though most of the time what he said was said so that only those nearest him could hear. In March, all the ninth graders at my school took the PSAT. I had never seen such a test before, and found it remarkable that there were so many words on the test I had never heard of, especially since Daddy told us that we had good vocabularies and spoke excellent English. A month after taking the test, the results arrived. Mr. Nash handed out the results to his homeroom students. I opened mine, and was stunned by the results. Verbal: fortieth percentile. Math: thirtieth percentile. I began to wonder if I really was an idiot like Daddy said I was. Richard was in my second period Spanish class, and I asked him how he did.

“Good,” he answered.

“Can I see,” I asked, whereupon he handed me his report. Verbal: ninety-ninth percentile. Math: ninety-ninth plus percentile. “What does that mean,” I asked.

“It means that out of every hundred students taking the test, I scored higher than 99 of them did.”

“What does the plus mean?”

He answered, “It means that out of ten thousand students I would have outscored most.”



“When you and I talk, I understand what you’re saying. I do better in our Spanish class, and outscore you in history. How can your scores be so much higher than mine?”

“Come over to my house after school, and I will show you” he casually said. When the school day ended, we went to Richard’s house. He lived in a duplex. Their house had a finished basement. At one end of the basement was a wall of books. There must have been over a thousand of them. On a shelf at the end of the bookcases, there was a collection of vocabulary books. I took one of these books off the shelf and examined it. The first word I saw was “Machiavellian.” I asked Richard if he knew all the words in this book. “Yes,” he answered. “No way,” I said in disbelief, and asked him to define Machiavellian. He gave the response that was in the book. I selected another work from the same page, and again Richard answered without hesitation and correctly. “How did you do that,” I asked. “My brother, Mack, when he was getting ready to go to college, used these books to boost his SAT scores. My mom said I should start reading them too.” As I put the book back on the shelf, I noticed that there were at least a dozen such books in this collection. I wondered why we did not have such books. I wondered how Jeannie managed to make the National Honor Society and get into college without such books.

At dinner that night, I showed my PSAT results to my parents. Daddy said nothing as he tossed the paper to Mommy. Mommy asked what it meant. I told her what Richard had told me. Then I mentioned Richard’s scores and his collection of vocabulary books. Daddy said, “That’s crap. Those books don’t help anyone. You

either know that stuff or you don't. You're either stupid or you're smart. I responded, "But I asked Richard two words, and he knew both of them. The first word I found was Machiavellian." Daddy interrupted me and gave a pretty good definition of that word and wore a self-satisfied look on his face as if to say, told you so, but when I told him Richard knew the meaning of the second word I had found, "lagniappe" Daddy responded, "That doesn't prove anything." I waited for him to spit out that answer, but he never did. I wondered if he knew the meaning of that word too. I had my suspicions that he did not as Daddy never passed up an opportunity to let those around him know how smart and superior to them he was.

## 36

Our Boy Scout troop at Fort Richardson had a campout every month regardless of the weather. Our leader was a young soldier named Jerry Oolie. He was in Daddy's outfit. Jerry was also an Eagle Scout like Paul Messick, but unlike Paul, Daddy never said anything bad about Jerry, not that it would have changed our opinion of him. Jerry spent all of his time during our weekly scout meetings helping his scouts work on merit badges, and teaching us about camping, hiking, cooking, and survival. It was the time he spent with us on merit badges that earned him my greatest respect. To achieve the rank of Eagle Scout, one has to earn the Nature Merit Badge. He suggested the idea of microbiology as the means by which I could satisfy the requirements. "Think of it," he said, "With a jar of water and a microscope, you can see all of the works of nature in a single drop of water."

On Ship Creek there was a small waterfall visible from the road. On school days, the bus passed by it. I asked Daddy if he would take me there. "When I get around to it," Daddy responded. That was his response for two months. Then one Sunday afternoon, he came to me and said, "Let's go get that water you wanted." I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a mayonnaise jar and lid that I had been saving under the kitchen sink next to the garbage can for just this occasion. Daddy was not familiar with the spot I wanted to visit, so I gave him the directions that the bus driver took, and eventually, we arrived at the area with a small waterfall. He parked the car, and I got out and walked toward the water's edge. Even before I reached the water, I heard Daddy yell, "Hurry it on up; I don't have all day for this." I had wanted Daddy to come along with me, but he waited at the car. I wanted to tell him what I hoped to find in the water, and how that might help me with my Nature Merit Badge. I looked back at Daddy to let him know I heard him, but he was smoking a cigarette and looking at the traffic on the road.

As I neared the waterfall, I saw minnows darting through the water. Near them, I saw submerged plants floating in the pool of water near the waterfall. I reached out as far as I could, and gathered in some of the plant life and water. Before I stood up, I heard Daddy's impatient voice yell, "Let's go!" I capped the jar with its lid and rushed back to the car. When I got there, Daddy said, "Get in." On the trip home, I sat with the jar on my lap hoping Daddy would say something about it, but we rode home in silence. As we neared our house, I felt increasingly like I had

been a great inconvenience to Daddy, so I thanked him for his time and for helping me as we turned on to Richardson Drive.

The next day, I took my jar to school in a paper bag. I showed it to my Biology teacher, and told her, "I am working on my Nature Merit Badge, and I am going to look for various animals in this jar."

She said, "Well, why not come in during lunch tomorrow, and use the microscope to examine what's in the water." I was elated by her suggestion. The next day, I looked through the microscope and I beheld a vision of the invisible world more wonderful than all the textbook pictures I had ever seen. In the first drop of water, I found rotifers, euglena, and a host of other miniature animals that I had previously only seen in black and white pictures in my high school Biology book. My delight was as great as Van Leuwenhoek's when he looked through the first microscope.

At my next meeting with Jerry Oolie, I began to check off the requirements for my Nature Merit Badge. It took several weeks, but Jerry was patient and supportive. Eventually, one of the truly difficult high hurdles to Eagle Scout, the Nature Merit Badge, was soon pinned to my merit badge sash.

During the final month of school, the family turned its attention to Jeannie's return from college. Daddy had arranged a job for her at the Army/Air Force Exchange on the post. Jeannie would have an opportunity to earn money for her sophomore year. I looked forward to her return so that the old familial arrangements we had had might return. Having no buffer between Daddy and me

and Brian was stressful. Jeannie was so good at reading Daddy' temperament. I longed for the days when she was in the house, and Daddy was kept at bay.

The only job available to youth living at Fort Richardson was a position known as "bagboy." These are the young people who put the groceries into bags and take them out to the cars of the commissary patrons. Bagboys worked for tips, and tips were meager, but it was the one place on a military installation where young people could earn money. To get one of these jobs, it helped to have connections. A person known as the "Team Captain" was the sole decider on employment on one of the teams of bagboys at the commissary. Richard Gwinn was a friend and neighbor of Mike Willoughby, one of the team captains. Richard told me that Mike was looking for some new bagboys. The next time that Mike's team worked, I showed up prepared to work. Mike asked me a few questions, and told me to go to work doubling paper bags for the other boys. "You will need to double up a couple of hundred bags, and then distribute them to the other stations. When that's done, see me, and I will tell you where to work." I spent the next ninety minutes making doubled bags for the commissary's customers. Finally, I finished, and reported back to Mike. He looked over my work and told me to go and work at the register where Richard was working. He told me to report the following Wednesday after school.

Each register had had four boys working as bagboys. The bagboys first bagged the groceries, then placed the bags in a shopping cart, and then pushed the loaded cart to the shopper's car. It was the job of the bag boys to put all the

groceries into the customer's car. The customer would then tip the bag boy for the service. Some customers were generous and tipped as much as a dollar. Most were more frugal and might give a bagboy twenty cents. A few did not tip at all. At the end of my first day, I had earned nearly five dollars. When I arrived home just after six that Saturday evening, my pockets jingled with silver coins, and I felt rich.

"Where have you been?" Daddy asked in his angry voice.

"I was working at the commissary as a bagboy," I said.

"You missed dinner. Did anyone know you were going to work?"

"When I left this morning, I did not know I was going to get the job, but I was hired. I never had time to make a call," I said trying to defend myself.

"Well you missed the dinner that your mother prepared for you. We're done eating. This is not a truck stop or a restaurant where you can just come and go as you please. The next meal is tomorrow after Mass. Now get out of here." As I ran up the stairs, I had to hold back my tears, but once in my bedroom, I just plopped down on my bed with my face in my pillow and let the tears flow. Later, I counted the money.

## 35

During the summer, Jeannie spent much of her time at home talking to Daddy. Sometimes, they would go out on the porch and smoke together. This was just one change in Jeannie that I noticed. She had cut her hair short, and now she swore like Daddy, but not as often as Daddy. More than anything, Jeannie's primary

interest seemed to be money. When she was not working at the Exchange, she was babysitting for any number of families. The church rehired her as the choir director.

The traditional way of ending the summer at our home was by celebrating Labor Day. This year, Daddy drove us to the Ski Bowl in the Chugach Mountains. During the winter we would ski in the area. When we arrived at the Ski Bowl at the end of summer, we were surprised to find the area overgrown with native vegetation and strewn with watermelon-sized boulders. Mommy had made ham sandwiches and we devoured them along with baked beans and potato salad. After lunch, we wandered through the field of local alpine plant life and discovered that there were many blue berry plants growing among the other vegetation in the area. Mommy said we should collect the blueberries and she would make blueberry pancakes the next morning before Jeannie left for the airport to go back to school.

The next day after our blueberry pancake breakfast, we kissed Jeannie goodbye and marched off to school. Mommy and Daddy took Jeannie to the airport. On Wednesday, she started her sophomore year in college as I began my sophomore year in high school.

My sophomore year would be my fourth school in less than two years. Many of my friends from Arcturus Junior High School joined me as sophomores at East Anchorage High School. I had never seen so large a school. There must have been over two thousand students there. Most of the classes that I took were continuations of the classes I had taken in ninth grade. Now I took English II, Spanish II, Biology II, PE, World Affairs, and Algebra 1. I had made a D in Algebra,

but even though a D was a passing grade, Daddy said I needed to make a C before he would let me move on to Geometry. The school agreed with Daddy.

In Biology II, Mr. Reinholtz paired up the students paired up at the tables. My tablemate was Victoria Tucker. She was a junior who was short, wore glasses, and had read a lot of books. Vicki was also in the band and played the piccolo. She wore a letterman jacket and had three stripes on her sleeve. Even though we were in a biology class, we talked about a lot of things that I thought were interesting. After the first few weeks of class, I found myself wanting to get to class early just so I could talk with her. It would take me a while before I realized that she was always in the classroom when I arrived.

A month into the school year, the teacher read an announcement that there would be a "Spook Dance" on Halloween, and that there would be a disc jockey, refreshment, and a dance contest. I had never asked a girl out on a date. In the past, I had suggested that I would be at the dance, and it would be nice to see someone else there. That had been my approach with Barbara Holper and Vera Hill in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but now I found that if I wanted a date I had to ask my question face to face, and this was nearly as frightening to me as showing Daddy my report card!

A week before the dance, I asked Vicki if she would like to go to the Spook Dance, and she said that she would like to go, but she needed to make sure it was all right with her parents. This was not the yes or no answer I had anticipated. No matter her response on Monday, I would be tormented all weekend until our next biology class. When we met again the next Monday, she gave me her answer. "Yes, I



can go to the dance, but my mom wants to know if your parents could pick us up if she takes us.” That afternoon, I nearly flew from the bus stop to our front door. “Mommy, I have a date this Saturday, but I need you to pick us up from the dance. Can you do that?” Mommy said she could do that, and that she thought it very nice that both sets of parents shared the responsibility of getting their children to and from the dance. Then she started asking me questions about Vicki, her family, what they did, how old she was, what was her religion, and much more.

The mudroom entry to our house was a mess. Above the coat rack was a bookshelf with dozens of books haphazardly tossed one on top of the other. To my eye, it was unsightly, and I figured that this would be the first thing that Vicki would see upon entering our house. We were not slobs, but the coatroom with its boots, books, and coats did not look tidy. In fact to my eye it said, “slobs.” After everyone went to bed that Friday night, I organized the books according to size, arranged the coats by color, and neatly paired up the boots and shoes in the coatroom. Then I got out the vacuum and shut the inside door to the mudroom and vacuumed it until all of the dust bunnies, clods of dirt, and other debris were no longer evident. Then I walked out of the house and reentered as if it were my first time in the house. What my eyes saw delighted me. I knew that Vicki’s first impression of our family would be positive.

At lunch the next day, Daddy told Mommy that the coatroom was the sharpest he had ever seen it. Mommy commented that she really liked the way the room looked too. Brian said, “This Vicki Tucker must be very special for you to go

through that kind of effort over something so trivial.” Then everyone except for me was laughing. I could feel myself blushing, and added, “I just want it to look nice for my guest.”

The dance began at seven, and Vicki and I arranged it so that she would be at our house at six-thirty. I told her to park out front and ring the doorbell when she arrived. I was upstairs in my bedroom waiting for the doorbell. I did not hear a doorbell, but I did hear Mommy talking to someone from the kitchen below. “Come on in. It’s so nice to meet you, and is this your mother? Hi, I’m Mayme, Timmy’s mother.” Then I heard a voice I did not know. As I came down the stairs and entered the kitchen, I found Mommy, Vicki, and her mother in the kitchen. Mrs. Tucker said, “We got lost, but we knew which house we were looking for, so when we saw the number on the side of the building, we figured we came in the back way.” Mommy answered, “Well, we’re glad you found us.” Vicki introduced me to her mother. After saying goodbye to everyone, we left for the dance. Mommy said she would be at the dance at ten o’clock to take us home.

Mrs. Tucker said the dance was going to be in the cafeteria. She worked there as a lunchtime food aid. “They have moved all the tables to the gym and set the room up with a nice Halloween theme” she said. “You kids are going to have a lot of fun; I am sure.” There was a three-dollar per person entry fee. I brought money I earned as a bagboy and paid our way into the dance. Vicki wore a long blonde wig, faded blue jeans, white sneakers, and a plaid red shirt and looked like Raggedy Ann. Vicki actually had short, medium-brown hair. The entrance to the

dance was through a cardboard tunnel that was made by connecting a number of increasingly smaller cardboard boxes together. The tunnel was about twenty feet long and hanging from the top of the boxes were ghosts, vampires, witches, and other scary things associated with Halloween.

The dance hall was dimly lit, but hanging from the ceiling was a mirrored ball that reflected light around the room adding to the Halloween atmosphere. Vicki and I danced every dance, but I enjoyed the slow dances the most. By the end of the evening, there was no space between our bodies as we slow danced the last song of the night. I had never before felt a girl's body so close to mine, and I enjoyed how her body felt next to me.

Later that year, we went to the Christmas Dance. In the spring, Vicki asked me if I would be her date to an awards ceremony for young musicians that would take place the final week of school in late May. This ceremony was held at the Golf Club on Fort Richardson. The room was set up for dinner and over a hundred students from all over our part of Alaska were to receive awards. When they called Vicki's name, I applauded the loudest and longest. After the award ceremony, there was a dance with a live band. When Vicki's mom dropped me off at my house, Vicki walked me to the front door. She told me this was the nicest date she had ever been on. I told her it was my nicest date too. I wanted to tell her that I would like to kiss her, but with her mother in the car, and my parents in my house--in the Heath household where sex was never discussed or even hinted at--I did not have the courage to speak my mind.

## 36

As the school year came to an end, I reflected on the year. I had earned the rank of Eagle Scout, I had a job that paid money, and I had nearly two hundred dollars saved. I passed all my classes with a C or better. I had several close friends with whom I could share my feelings about life and my future. In a week, my sister would be home, and I had some very big questions to ask her about girls, dating, kissing, and the meaning of life. I knew she would be able to help me understand what was real in life and what was not real, but more than anything, I wanted her to tell me what a girl would want from a boy.

Jeannie's school year ended on May 24<sup>th</sup>, and Daddy said she would be home by May 27<sup>th</sup>. That date came and went and Jeannie did not call. Daddy then called Aunt Margie in Chicago to see if Jeannie had gone there to visit them. She had not. Then he called his parents in Ottawa to see if Jeannie had been there. Again, they had not heard from Jeannie for several months. Daddy then called the college to see if they knew where Jeannie was, but no one had seen her since classes had let out.

Throughout that week, our phone was in constant use. Either Daddy was calling someone, or someone was calling Daddy. Finally on Friday May 31, Jeannie called. "Where the hell are you," Daddy screamed into the phone. "I don't give a shit who the fuck you have met; you will have your goddam ass on the next plane out of Seattle or I will disown you. Do you hear...Hello, Hello, God Damn her, she hung up on me. Mayme, your daughter hung up on me."

Jeannie called back later that day, but Daddy never changed his attitude, and his conversations with Jeannie kept getting shorter as she kept hanging up. Late on Saturday, a person-to-person call came for Mommy. It was Jeannie. She told Mommy that she had met a very nice boy who was a student at Saint Benedict's College. She had met his family, and she liked them, and they liked her very much. She wanted time to think about things, as her life was now different since she had this nice young man. Mommy told her to come home, and they could discuss things once she was home. Then Jeannie asked to speak with Daddy. Daddy was still angry and by the end of the conversation he told Jeannie, "You will be on that airplane Monday morning, or you are out of this family." Then he slammed the receiver. Brian and I were upstairs in our bedroom. Even though the military built our housing project to withstand a magnitude 7.5 earthquake, the building codes were no match for Daddy's voice and fury as every angry word he uttered pierced the walls and our eardrums as if he were in the room with us. We whispered, "What's he going to do to her when she gets home?" We would have to wait two days to find out.

Jeannie's plane was scheduled to land at noon at the Elmendorf Air Force Base only miles from Fort Richardson. We left our house a little after eleven. Brian and I were very nervous over what might happen once Jeannie and Daddy were together. I had heard the comedian Bill Dana telling stories on the radio the day before, and to lighten the leaden atmosphere in the car, I tried to tell some of his jokes, but Daddy told me to shut up. In silence, I slumped down in my seat. In my

mind, I tried to imagine what Daddy would do to Jeannie. Would he pull off his belt and spank her? Would he slap her in public? Would he scream at her in front of the crowd of people at the airport? Daddy parked the car, and like a savage beast on the prowl for prey, he marched into the terminal with us trailing behind him. A small crowd of people had already started to gather at the arrival gate. Over the loudspeaker, we heard an announcement, "Northwest Orient Flight 2963 will be delayed" That was Jeannie's flight. The people who stood waiting with us began to discuss the cause of the delay. "Bad weather, late take off, maybe something happened on board and they had to reroute the flight. We waited an hour. Then there came another announcement, "Will those waiting for Northwest Orient Flight 2963 please meet the ticket agent at the Northwest Orient counter." Daddy told us to wait where we were. He would go find out what was happening.

When he returned, he had a look on his face that something was terribly wrong. "Jeannie's plane is missing. It was last heard from at ten-thirty this morning. They are looking for it. We should go home." As we left the airport, I saw women sobbing, and the look of worry and concern that I saw on Daddy's face was on the face of all those who were not crying.

When we arrived home, the priest from church was waiting on our porch. Soon other people began to come over to speak with Mommy and Daddy. Daddy told Brian and me to go over to the ballpark and watch the game. For the first time since we arrived home from the airport, Brian and I discussed the situation. "I think the plane landed in the water, just like the one that had the engine problem last year

did. The Coast Guard will come and rescue them, and Jeannie will be home in a few days." I told Brian I liked that story and prayed that it was what happened. About 10:00 pm, Brian and I walked home. The house was now dark and empty of visitors. Mommy was in bed crying and Daddy was trying to console her. We still knew nothing about the plane or the fate of those on board.

The next morning, the *Anchorage Times* newspaper was on the dinner table. The headlines read, "101 Perish Onboard NW Orient Airliner." Daddy was sitting at the table, and I asked him what this meant. He told me that planes had been covering the area that the plane last reported from, and all they found was minor debris like luggage, life vests, seat cushions, but no trace of life. The plane crashed into the water and all aboard are presumed dead. "Jeannie is dead."

A weeklong search yielded no survivors and scant aircraft remains. The rescue effort was transformed into a wreckage recovery detail. The church held a Requiem Mass the following Monday. All those on board the stricken airplane were active duty military or the dependents of those at Fort Richardson joining their military sponsor. During this ordeal and afterward, neither Daddy nor Mommy talked to either Brian or me about how we felt losing a sister. I cried loudly inside for the loss of a friend, confidant, advisor, and big sister. I knew that somehow I would get over this loss, but I was not sure about Brian. At night for months after Jeannie's death, I would hear him whimper in his sleep. He did not do that before Jeannie died. By the time we left Alaska five months later, Brian had largely stopped crying at night or at least I believed so. Daddy had split us up by giving me Jeannie's

room. Brian had selected our bedroom, as it was larger than Jeannie's. Daddy's rule was the person with the highest grade point average got to take the room of his choice. Brian had the better grades. When I moved into Jeannie's room, I could no longer hear the sounds of my brothers troubled sleep.

By the time I moved into Jeannie's room, someone had removed all of her clothes and other belongings left behind while she was away in college. Though Daddy had an expensive Nikon camera, there were no pictures of any of us on display around the house. Day by day, the memory of my sister became dimmer and dimmer. At night though as I slept, my head rested on her pillow.

Though I was not aware of the reason for it, I noticed that my contact with others became distant and rare. Richard was still my closest friend. Brian and I shared most of our thoughts, but that was where my social world ended. I played football that fall on the Fort Richardson team, but did not care if we won or lost. When Mike Willoughby left his team at the Commissary, I became the team captain, and I earned even more money, but I did not see it as an honor. I felt like a wind up doll, and I was only going through the motions, but there was no emotion only invisible grief. I had planned to call Vikki after Jeannie came home, but never did. It was one of my few regrets. Being cold and unfeeling made life endurable for me even if it hurt those around me. The loss of my sister would be an invisible wound in my soul that oozes still.



My parents did not talk about Jeannie or her death. They built a wall around their pain. There was never any discussion of her death with Brian or me, and that was the way Jeannie's death was handled in our family.

In early December after nearly three years in Alaska, we left the state. Once again in the middle of a school year we had become homeless and placeless wanderers. Instead of flying to Illinois in a matter of hours, Daddy decided to drive the Al-Can Highway. Mommy refused to get on an airplane after losing Jeannie, and traveling by road was the only way out of the state. The last thing I did before we left was purchase an Arco study guide for the SAT that I would take early in my senior year.

As we traversed the nearly endless expanse of landscape that was Canada, I began to memorize all the vocabulary words in the study guide, beginning with "abate." After pleading with Daddy for nearly a year to buy such a book, I had found one on my own and purchased it with my own money. Now in the back of our Dodge station wagon with my brother, and our German shepherd, Teague, as my travel mates, I was trying to learn enough to get into any college. But I needed a good score on the SAT. I passed the 4950 miles between Anchorage and Brooksville, Florida then the 1150 miles to Fort Hood, absorbing new vocabulary words, teasing out analogies, and adding antonyms to my personal lexicon. It was a long trip, and I needed many miles for study.

# Part IV

## Fort Hood and Freedom

### 39

“I was never so glad to be leaving someplace.”

Those were the first words Max spoke to us at Fort Hood, Texas. After a month on the road without a place to call our own, we had settled into the Visitor’s Quarters on the post. A kid named Max, a high school senior, in less than five minutes had Brian and me convinced that we wanted to get back in the car and head somewhere, anywhere other than Fort Hood. Like us, Max’s family was being transferred in the middle of the school year. We stayed two nights in guest lodging where we shared the men’s room with half a dozen other families. We saw Max several times during our stay and each time we met him, he gratuitously shared his thoughts on the high school, Baptists, the teachers, and the kids in the area. We wondered what we were getting ourselves into at this new installation.

The furniture arrived a few days after we got to Fort Hood, and by the end of the week we had made great progress on putting the house in order. Our meager possessions had been in storage while we lived in Alaska, except for the clothes on our backs and our books. Mommy sorted through a small mountain of boxes before finding one-marked “curtains.” She opened the box and dumped out its contents.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she fingered the fabric of our curtains. "Jeannie helped me make these curtains when we lived at 905-D Maple Lane at Michigan State," she said and then fell into a trance as if she were watching on an invisible screen in her mind as she and my sister measured, cut, stitched, and hung each set of curtains. Mommy wiped the tears from her eyes, and began to measure windows to see if we had any curtains that were ready to be hung.

While Mommy busied herself with curtains, Brian and I hefted all the boxes to their appropriate rooms in the house. Brian and I each had our own room. Brian was again given the larger room due to the fact that he had better grades than I did. But the room he chose had no window and abutted the common wall that we shared with our neighbors in the other house in the duplex. His room was dark, and even with overhead lighting, it was gloomy and made me feel sad. My room had two windows; one was large and faced the road, and the other was smaller and faced the carport. I always knew when Daddy arrived home, or when he left for work if I left the smaller one just slightly ajar. Brian and I emptied the boxes in our rooms. We placed the contents of the boxes in drawers and in the closets. Mommy told us to open all the boxes marked towels and sheets and to empty the contents. We then began the process of washing and drying all these items. It took many loads of laundry before we had washed and dried everything to Momma's standards. Momma helped us fold all the towels and sheets. It was a struggle folding the fitted sheets, and Brian and I got into an argument over how best to do the job, which only ended when Momma said, "Your father will be home in thirty minutes. So get a

move on with the folding.” Once we had put the towels and sheets in the closet, we began to make our beds. Momma’s warning to us was, “Your father will be checking your beds for hospital corners on your sheets, and no lumps from sheets or blanket.” The now faded bedspread I placed on my bed had been with me since we had moved off campus to our rental on Howard Street near the Frandor Shopping Center at the end of fourth grade. It had a Naval motif. On it, images of great naval ships of the late eighteenth century, such ships as Constitution, Chesapeake, Constellation, Congress, and Essex filled the marine blue bedspread. Now in the last half of my junior year, I was still using the same bedspread. Jeannie had once told me the history of each of the ships memorialized on the bedspread.

By the time Daddy arrived home, almost all the boxes had been emptied, flattened, and taken out to the trash for collection. Several boxes of tools, hoses, and what not were placed in the storage shed at the end of the driveway. Momma had washed all the dishes, pots and pans. Around four o’clock she had begun our first dinner at home since early December the previous year. She prepared tuna casserole with coleslaw. Momma had found a recipe while we visited Daddy’s parents in Florida that called for potato chips as a part of the recipe. Brian and I had not eaten since before noon and we were looking forward to this dinner. Daddy arrived home, and told Mommy he had a surprise for all of us, “We’re going to the NCO Club for dinner,” he announced. “Friday is steak night. Dinner is a dollar a person and that includes salad and desert.” We all hurried to change our clothes. This would be only the second time we had eaten meat on a Friday in my memory.

Daddy would treat us to this dinner twice a month. He said, "We can't feed ourselves as cheaply as the NCO Club does on Fridays. Might as well take advantage of it," he said.

My classes at Killeen High were a continuation of what I had taken in Alaska. English III, American History, Geometry, Drafting, and Typing comprised my junior year of study. Daddy had told me to take typing and drafting. Secretly, I knew this was Daddy's way of saying I could never get into college, and he was preparing me for life as a laborer.

My new history teacher, Mr. Southard, seemed to appreciate the fact that I read the American History book, and when he asked questions of the class, I had the answer at the ready. Each chapter of American History had a list of key words that we were required to define and turn in each Monday. At first, I resented the idea of having to write out the definitions, but soon I discovered that I could accomplish several important tasks at one time by writing out the definitions.

Each night after Mommy and Daddy went to bed, I would pull shut the accordion wall between the dining room and the living room. I also closed the two pocket doors to the kitchen. Now insulated from the rest of the house in the dining room, I placed my Smith-Corona portable typewriter on the dining room table and began to work on my vocabulary words from my SAT prep book. I wrote the definition given in the prep book, and the definition that I found in Daddy's *Abridged Oxford English Dictionary*. I would start typing around 10:00pm and continue until nearly 1:00am almost every night. As my vocabulary grew larger, I began to use

some of the words to respond to Mr. Southard's definitions. We studied American intervention in China and that chapter used the term "Yellow Horde." I typed out: "A redounding of the suppressed masses of the Orient against imperialist behavior of the Occidental interlopers of the U. S. and Western Europe." Over and over in my definitions I began to use the words I was learning. I expected Mr. Southard to make some kind of comment, even if it were only a check mark, but he never commented on my word choices. I began to wonder if he actually read what I submitted. I had to maintain a delicate balance in his class. First I relished the opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge of American History and did not want to jeopardize my standing in his class by making an accusatory remark as to whether or not he read our definitions. More importantly, I had an A in his class, and I did not want to jeopardize that either. I remained mute on the topic of whether or not my definitions were reviewed.

Night after night, I filled upwards of six pages with type written definitions and a sentence or two containing an example of the word in action. Mr. Southard continued to give me A's in his class, but my typing teacher began to remark on my improved skills in her class. Several times a week, I would take a practice vocabulary test in the ARCO SAT prep book, and I began to notice that my scores were slowly improving in both synonym recognition and analogies. I planned to take the SAT in November, and I knew that I had much to cover if I wanted to make a score that would gain my admission to a college.

Mrs. Stapp was my Geometry teacher. Her cloud white hair and leathery face led some of us to believe that she had learned Geometry as a pupil at Euclid's feet. She was very helpful in explaining postulates and theorems and far more patient than any math teacher I had ever had before her. I also relied heavily on Jeannie's Geometry book from Lebanon High School as it had a large number of step-by-step solutions to geometry problems in it.

In March, Daddy's outfit, the First Armored Division, left on a military exercise called "Desert Strike." For two months he would be in the California Desert around Fort Irwin. He would be gone until the final week of class my junior year. During his absence, I spent even more time on my studies and practicing for the SAT. Mrs. Stapp had study sessions after school, and I went to all of these so that I could improve my grade in Geometry. The last week of the term we turned in all of our textbooks. I noticed that the student population had dwindled substantially as the graduating seniors seemed to be off campus or just cutting class. On the last day of class, we picked up our report cards. I had earned a B in English, A in American History, B in Drafting, C in Typing, and a B in Geometry. Brian looked at my report card, the best report card I have ever earned in high school, and said, "Geeze Timmy, Daddy should go away more often." I could not have said it better. When Daddy saw my report card, he did not indicate any surprise at the grades I earned nor did he assign any significance to the fact that I had earned these grades in his absence.

Shortly after our arrival at Fort Hood, Brian became involved in an elite aspect of the Boy Scouts, The Order of the Arrow. I had ended my relationship with

the Boy Scouts when we left Alaska. I had set out to become an Eagle Scout, and that was achieved in March of my sophomore year. We had planned more celebrations for the summer, but Jeannie's death had wiped out those plans. After achieving Eagle Scout, I lost interest in everything except camping, but that was done only once a month. My studies began to take up most of my time, especially after I discovered that the Fort Hood Library had a special section set aside for the New York Times Best Sellers.

One aspect of the Order of the Arrow that appealed to Brian was its emphasis on Indian lore and cultures. I was studying in my room one night when I thought I heard sleigh bells ringing somewhere in the house. I arose and went to search for the source of the noise. When I looked in Brian's room, he was gone. As I searched the rest of the house, I could find no sign of my brother. Then I heard the bells again, but now I could tell that the source was coming from outside the house in the vicinity of our back yard. I opened the door to our back yard, and there was my brother dressed in a Native American costume. He wore a band around his head that had several feathers in it. On his wrists and legs, he wore bracelets and anklets bedecked with apricot-size silver bells which proved to be the source of the sound I had been hearing intermittently throughout the evening. "What are you doing?" I asked. "I'm practicing for a skit we are doing for the Order of the Arrow at a campout I will be on next week," he replied. "Watch me, and tell me what you think. Then he turned on the portable record player that used to belong to Jeannie, but now belonged to Brian and me. I could hear the beat of tom-toms in the



background, and then began the hypnotic chanting of an older sounding man. As he chanted, Brian slowly began to vibrate his body to the sounds he heard. Finally as if by magic, he was stepping to the beat of the music as interpreted by the chanting of the old man. He moved with such grace and accuracy, that I felt I watched a real Native American in action. As he concluded his dance, I laughed for joy at the beauty of his efforts and the gracefulness of his dance routine.

“What do you do with this dance?” I asked.

“All of us are expected to come up with a routine for our final initiation ceremony,” he said. “This is mine. I have read about war dances and seen the footwork on paper, and this is my effort.” In his hand he held a stick nearly six feet long. It too was decorated with bells and animal fur. It looked authentic. “Good luck,” I said as I went back to my bedroom to study.

The week after school ended, Brian and all the other boys who had been preparing for the Order of the Arrow left for a week long camp out that would be the final step of their initiation. That was the same week that we had our first significant rain at Fort Hood. It had misted several times since we had arrived. We even had a couple of events that the Texans referred to as “Northerds.” But we had not had any rain until late May. A light rain ran began to fall shortly after Brian left, but it ended by midnight. The next day, however, the sky tried again to unburden itself of its watery load, but was only moderately successful. On the third day, we had a real Texas rainstorm that did not let up for two days.

Mommy became nervous about the rain, because she had been watching the TV news broadcasts. She said she was sure that the heaviest rain fell in the area that Brian and the other boys camped. Daddy came home for lunch and announced that the Army was flying a search and rescue mission to the vicinity of the Boy Scout camp. I could tell that Mommy was visibly upset over the rain and the fact that Brian was in it. Early the next morning the phone rang. It was the Boy Scouts. Brian and the other boys had been evacuated from their camp and moved to higher ground. They were all right, soaked and without their camping gear, but they were all accounted for and in good health. Mommy shouted, "Thank you sweet JESUS," as Daddy relayed the news to her.

A couple of days later, Brian returned home and was very much perplexed over the ado Mommy made at his return. "We were never in any trouble, and it was stupid of them to move us from our campsite, but it was fun to ride in a helicopter," he said.

That summer, I spent most of my time either at the swimming pool or at home reading and preparing for the SAT. I had found a list of book titles that college freshman were expected to have read. One of these books was Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. I checked it out from the post library. I knew nothing about the story, Chaucer, or the period in which the tales were written. I knew Canterbury was in England, and Thomas à Beckett had once been its Archbishop. After a week of reading, I had read nearly half of the book, and at dinner one night, I began to ask Daddy about it. I began by calling Chaucer by his first name, but mispronounced it.

Rather, I called him Goffry (with a soft G as in golf), as I did not know how his name was pronounced. Daddy began to laugh. He was a bit overweight the summer of 1964, and the more he laughed the more the fat on his stomach began to jiggle almost like the proverbial “bowl full of jelly.” For what seemed like several minutes, he laughed like this, uncontrollably. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he took on an odd shade of purple as he continued to laugh. Finally, I asked, “What is so funny?” My question only set off another round of laughter. Then Daddy said, “His name is Jeffrey not Goffry.” Indignantly I retorted, “I have never seen that name before, and I did my best to sound it out.” By this time, I had lost all interest in any discussion Daddy might have wanted to have about *The Canterbury Tales*. Instead, I went to the *Britannica* and found out what I wanted to know about the author and his opus magnum. I discussed the books with myself.

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Mike McCarter lived across the street from me and was one of my closest friends that summer. We would go to the gym daily and lift weights and run laps. To use the Fort Hood gym during the day, one had to be eighteen years old. A soldier who was the monitor for the gym caught Mike and me lifting weights one day. We had been there everyday during the preceding month, but on this day, some soldier was exercising his authority and asked us how old we were. I said I was 18. He asked, “Why haven’t I seen you here before?” I replied, “I just got back from Northwestern, and this is my first time here.” He responded, “Northwestern in

Evanston, Illinois?" I had no idea where Northwestern was, but I knew it had a great academic reputation. I made a guess and answered, "Yeah, is there another Northwestern?" He replied, "Just checking. We need to keep the kids out of here so the GIs can use the place. See you 'round." After the attendant left us, Mike said, "What would you have done if he asked you for your ID?" I replied, "I would have told him I ran to the gym, and left my wallet at home." A big smile spread across Mike's face. We continued to lift weights.

In early July, Mike got the idea that we needed to begin swimming everyday. There were two pools that we could use on the post. There was the NCO pool, and it was open to dependents of NCO's who paid membership dues to the NCO Club. Daddy always paid his dues and one of the benefits of his dues was our right to use this pool. The other pool was the open pool. It was an Olympic-size pool with an Olympic size audience. As it was free, it was usually crowded with swimmers who filled the pool like sardines in a can.

Mike had met a girl, Miah, who liked him a lot. Miah had a beautiful face and the body of a woman in her early twenties, though she was only fourteen. A few weeks into our visits to the pool, Mike and Miah had become inseparable, and they took their inseparableness into the NCO pool, until one day the lifeguard blew his whistle. "You two, out of the pool." Mike emerged from the water with a part of his anatomy impressively swollen and as he stood up, he made an effort to hide it by rearranging his swim trunks. Miah adjusted her two-piece swimsuit while still in the water, and when she emerged created the impression of virginal innocence. The

lifeguard had hopped down from his aerie perch, and began to give the two lovers a stern warning. He was a soldier hired by Recreational Services to serve as a lifeguard. I could not hear what he was saying, but I could tell he was very unhappy with their behavior. Finally, he pointed to the exit after which Mike and Miah got their towels and left. Except for Mike, Miah, the lifeguard and me, it seemed like no one else in the pool noticed the underwater actions going on, or maybe no one cared. I stayed in the pool and swam laps. Later I met up with Mike who told me the whole story and what he and Miah did after they left the pool.

The next day, Mike came over around one o'clock and talked me into going to the Olympic pool. The lifeguard had kicked him and Miah out of the NCO pool for the rest of the month, and he threatened to tell Miah's parents about their activities if he saw them in the pool again before August. After we got into the pool, we tried to swim laps, but the pool was too crowded, so we swam the width of the pool in the deep water where we only needed to be mindful of divers using the ten-meter board. After an hour in the water, I had gotten sunburned and told Mike that I was going home. He convinced me to stay longer saying, "The best way to get a sun tan is to get burned for a couple of days. That will speed up the tanning process." I looked at Mike's skin and noticed he had a very deep tan even though he had blond hair and blue eyes. I figured there was something to what he said, and stayed for at least an additional hour working on my tan.

That night, my skin tingled as though tiny creatures were crawling under it, but I was not in any real pain. The next day, Mike came over with his suit wrapped

tightly in his towel and said, "Let's go swimming and work on that tan of yours." I told Mike that I did not think it was a good idea to go back in the sun with the sunburn I already had. "No, that's a bad idea. You need to go back out and get more sun. That will give you a real good tan."

I grabbed a towel and my trunks from the shower curtain railing in the bathroom and went off with Mike to work on my tan. The crowd in the pool was much smaller than the day before, and the water felt good on my sunburn as we swam lap after lap the length of the pool. Unlike the NCO Club pool, there was no awning to provide protection from the sun, so after swimming, we sat out on chairs along the edge of the pool and watched the people in the pool. We had been at the pool for nearly two hours, when my back began to suddenly itch as if I had ants running a marathon under my skin. I told Mike that I was going to go home and put on some ointment. He tried to convince me to stay, but this time, I realized that there really was something wrong with Mike's theory about suntans.

When I got home, I showed my sunburned back to Mommy, and she said, "What were you thinking? You have a fifth degree burn. It's worse than your brother's was when he came back from camp in May." She went to her medicine cabinet and got out Noxzema cold cream and Bactine. She slowly rubbed in the Noxzema and then she sprayed my back with a generous shower of Bactine. I reeked from the fragrance of both products, but the pain in my back began to subside. Later that night the effects of the ointments began to wear off, but that was long after my parents had gone to bed and the ointments that would end my pain

were in their medicine cabinet in their bathroom. I wet a bath towel with cold water, and after removing my T-shirt, I gently place the towel over my back. Then I went to the living room and stood with my back to the room air conditioner until the chilled air numbed my pain. I gulped several aspirin, and then I sat on a chair in front of the air conditioner for the next several hours. Exhaustion overcame the sense of pain, and I did a belly flop on to my bed where I remained asleep until noon the next day when Mike McCarter came over to the house.

As I looked at Mike, I was certain that he had taken on the shade of a dark beer bottle overnight. "Hey, let's go. There's girls waiting at the pool, and I'm ready to meet them," he said.

"I can't go out today, my back is burned, my face is burned, and I'm afraid of what might happen if I go into the sun again," I said. As I spoke, I pulled my shirt up over my back to show him my condition.

"Shit," he said, "you ought to see a doctor for that. Your skin is all puffed up with water blisters," he said as he poked my back.

"I'm just going to stay in today. In fact, I don't think I will ever go in the sun again," I said as I pulled my shirt down.

"Well, I'll drop by tomorrow to check on you. Maybe we could do a movie or something," he said as he left.

I stayed out of the sun for the rest of the week. The skin on my back began to peel in sheets, and eventually, I lost what seemed like several layers of skin. As one layer of burned skin fell off, its replacement would last for only several days before

it too sloughed off in great white flakes of dead skin. The flakes reminded me of fried chicken skin. After a month, I stopped molting, and by then, I had learned that I could not go into direct sunlight any longer. Only when the sun was at a low angle in the sky and its rays tame enough not to penetrate my shirt would I venture out into the world.

By mid August, the worst of the heat began to pass, but not before we had had thirty straight days of one hundred degree temperatures or higher.

This accidental confinement to the house did prove useful in some ways. It allowed me to continue my SAT preparation and to make good progress on reading all the books on the *New York Times* best sellers list. I had been at the post library one night to return *Armageddon*. A classmate of mine, Meagan Brown, a Colonel's daughter, saw me and asked what I was doing. I told her about *Armageddon*, and she said she had just read it too. This led to a conversation about books we had read, and she mentioned *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "No, I had not read it," I told her. She said, "It will change how you think about race in America if you do read it." I went to the circulation desk and asked that it be put on hold for me. A week after school started, I got a phone call informing me that the book was now available.

I was half way through the book when Daddy asked me what I was reading. As this happened at the dinner table, there was no way to hide the book. I put it down, and answered, "*To Kill a Mockingbird*." I was proud of the fact that I was reading this book. I sensed it had power. It challenged ideas about race. Daddy said, "Well, I don't think you should be reading that kind of literature." I had never



challenged Daddy on anything he had ever said, so I was not sure whose voice I heard when the words “why not?” were spoken. Daddy looked up from his dinner, but did not say anything. Mommy and Brian, just watched what was unfolding. Daddy answered my question with a statement. “I don’t think you are ready to read that kind of a book. I don’t think you are prepared for the subject matter, and I think it best you not read it.”

“Daddy,” I began, “this book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. This book touches on the issues that Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and others are concerned with in America. You told me when I was in first grade that Jeannie, Brian, and I were all going to go to college. You said this to us when you came home from work your first day on the job at ROTC at Michigan State University. I don’t know what Tim Heath will be allowed to read before he goes to college, but I know that every student in his classes in college will have read this book. How do you expect me to compete with those students, if I am not allowed to read the books that they are freely reading this very minute?” For a stunned moment, like superman getting wacked with a dose of kryptonite, Daddy was speechless. He just looked at me as if for the first time in his life he had seen me, and what he saw was not what he expected. Then in the most humane voice I had ever heard from him, he said, “Go ahead. Read what you think is right.”

That was it.

I had just taken on Daddy in a war of words and wits, and he, the giant with the 180 IQ, had no counter argument for mine. The feeling that surged through me

was better than having bashed his brains in with a ball bat. For a fleeting instant, I felt seven feet tall, and I had not shed blood, or used humiliating language, or any form of intimidation. All I knew was that I had won. I returned to my dinner, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mommy's head ever so slightly nodding up and down as if to say "YES!"

A week before my senior year started, I went to the high school and enrolled for class. I signed up for English IV, Civics, Physics, Algebra II, Sociology, and Health. At dinner that night, Daddy asked me what classes I had selected, and I told him. Then he said the oddest thing, "Why did you sign up for Physics?" I told him that I thought he wanted me to take that class. "Do you need the class to graduate," he asked. "No," I answered. "Then why take it," and that was the end of the conversation about my senior year classes." The next day, I went back to school and dropped physics, and signed up for study hall in its place.

All of my senior year classes were enjoyable except for Algebra II. I had struggled with Algebra I in my freshman year, and I barely made a C in the repeat of that course in my sophomore year. One of Brian's girlfriends, Karen, was in Algebra II with me, and she tried to help me study, but I had no interest in the subject or in her. I think the only reason Brian liked her was because her dad drove a Mercedes-Benz. Otherwise, I am sure Brian would not have spoken to her.

One of our first assignments was to memorize the square and cube roots of all the numbers from two to one hundred. Karen memorized a lot of other stuff like that too. On our bus ride to school each morning, and on the return trip home each

evening, Karen would review with me the math of the day or the math of the day before depending on which way the bus was heading. Try as I did to get into it, I just could not get past the blue underlined axioms and corollaries. Monday of week three we had our first test. "You will have 10 minutes to complete this test. When you have finished your test, please bring it to the front, and place it here on my desk, and then return to your seat," said Mrs. Hill. There were twenty-five questions on squares of this number and the cube of that and so on. There were several Venn diagrams and questions on sets and unions, but not much that I was familiar with. The first question asked the cube of seventy-one. I multiplied the number three times and derived 357,911, and worked the rest problem at snail-like speed. "Time's up, class. Stop writing. Please bring your papers to the front." On the bus ride home that night, I listened to every word about Algebra II that Karen had to say, but a callous for Algebra II had formed in my brain. As hard as I tried to let the math into my brain; the callous kept any of it from penetrating.

At the end of the semester, I dropped the class. I had only one shining moment in the class. When we reached chapter seven, all the questions became word problems. When Mrs. Hill gave back the tests, she always gave them back in descending order. I had almost always received my paper back last, but on this day, she handed me mine first. A pimply, red headed student, the smartest kid in the class, asked impertinently, "Mrs. Hill why are you changing the order of handing back the papers?" She replied huffily, "I haven't. I am giving the papers back in the same order as always. Highest to lowest." She had placed the test on my desk face

down. As she moved to the next student, I flipped over my test. One hundred per cent! The next highest grade was a ninety-two, and from there the scores dropped precipitously. After all the papers were handed out, Mrs. Hill stated, "Tim made the highest score in the class on this test." Fifteen sets of eyeballs were suddenly examining me as if I were some strange creature from the abyss of the oceans. As Mrs. Hill and the class worked the problems from the test on the chalkboard, I checked each of my answers, thinking Mrs. Hill had to have made a mistake. But my solutions were exactly as she explained them on the board. When the term ended, I told Mrs. Hill, that I was going to drop her course. She said she thought that best for me, but she said she was going to record my grade as an F+. "When they calculated your GPA they will give you a 65% for an F+." She wished me well if I took the course again, but I knew that there would be no more math in high school for me. I was assigned a second study hall.

As the senior year progressed, so too did the intensity of my study for the SAT. I worked on my vocabulary everyday including the weekends. I rarely went to bed before one o'clock in the morning, and I had compiled a small mountain of paper containing all the words I had learned. I took and retook all the analogy tests in my practice book. I used the book so often that the cover fell off from over use. The first Saturday in November, SAT day, Daddy dropped me off at the school. The test began at 8:00 in the morning, but he had to get to work, so he left me at the school at 7:30. I stood out in front of the school building alone for many minutes. I began to wonder if I had the wrong day. Panic set in as I pondered having missed

the SAT. Perhaps it had been the week before. This thought soon vanished as other students began to arrive. Some drove themselves, but most were dropped off by a parent.

The crowd gathering in front of the school differed from a school day crowd. The crisp air of early November was scented with the near hysteria wafting from the minds, bodies, and souls of several hundred high school seniors. Usually before school, the crowd at the door would be boisterous. Laughing, singing, story telling could be heard from different parts of that crowd, but today's gathering did none of those normal human things. Today's crowd was subdued, nearly mute. Those who talked did so in whispers. It was as if each of us was afraid that our knowledge might leak out of our mouths or some errata would enter our minds wiping slick reams of memories that had been neatly stacked in our minds just for this day. Eyes focused on the ground in front of their owners. Our shoes were our focus in those final moments before the proctors opened the doors. As we entered the building most of us knew that our future, our college future certainly, would be determined by a test. In six weeks some of us would be happy with the results, and some of us would be devastated by the results. I recalled my sense of devastation when I received my PSAT scores. I knew I had to do well or my future would be a living horror.

The proctor went over the instructions with us. When we reached the part asking what schools we wanted to receive our SAT scores, I was stumped. In early November, Daddy had not yet decided where we would be living when he retired.

He had mentioned Austin. I wrote down the number for the University of Texas. He had mentioned Los Angeles. I wrote in UCLA's number also. The truth was I did not know where Daddy would retire or where I would go to college. In that moment, I also realized, that I did not have any money to go to college. As I sat in the chair, the SAT suddenly did not seem to be so important. I began to realize I had no control over my life, and that Daddy ran my life just as he had run Jeannie's life and still ran Mommy's life and Brian's life. Moments before I ripped the paper seal on my SAT test, I began to think about all the things I needed to consider before I went off to college, and suddenly the SAT seemed to be a very tiny piece of this puzzle. "You may now open your booklet and begin part one of the test. You have forty-five minutes. There will be no notes, no talking, and no asking for help. If you must leave the room, you will leave your test and pencil on your desk. You may begin."

The sound of fifty people ripping the paper seal on their test simultaneously is a sound never forgotten. It sounded like a champagne cork popping out of a bottle, or a starter's pistol firing, or a dozen swimmers leaping into a pool at the start of a long race. Some say that there are no atheists in foxholes. In the silence of the room, I furtively glanced at many of my fellow test takers, and surmised that prayers were being offered up at this moment and any number of deals were being made between the individual and God as the test began.

At one o'clock, nearly cross-eyed, I staggered out of the test feeling like my brain had been wrung out like a sponge on washing day. Daddy had told me to call him when I was done with the test, but neither of us had planned on the office in the

school being closed. I walked the four miles to our house, and during the walk, I began to consider what I would ask Daddy when I got home. I also began to wonder how I would pay for school. Jeannie had received very little support from Daddy when she went to school, although Daddy acted and talked as if he had bankrolled her entire education as well as planned it. During the long march home, I realized that I needed to answer two questions that by the time I arrive home were distilled to two words. Where and How?

## 41

Miss Paterson was the English IV teacher my senior year. She had the reputation for being the toughest and best English teacher in the school. Her weight and size earned her the nickname “Fat Pat,” and even though in acts of self-deprecation she referred to herself by that name, none in her classes dared to call her that. I never heard it whispered in the halls or saw it written on the bathroom walls. Early in the year, she told us we would have to memorize one hundred lines of poetry. These would be taken from Shakespeare, Blake, Gray, Keats, Shelly, and Tennyson. I fell in love with Tennyson’s “Break, Break, Break,” because it reminded me of my lost sister as it must have reminded Tennyson of his lost Hallam. It reminded me of the nieces and nephews I would never be uncle to. It reminded me how fragile life really is in spite of our mistaken belief otherwise. Shelly’s “Ozymandias” was another poem on the list. In his own way, Shelly had been a rebel, but had never taken up arms. Instead, he renounced just about everything

that was considered normative behavior in his day. He wrote a letter to his father renouncing the hereditary title he was in line to receive. He renounced all conventions regarding sex and marriage when he ran off to the continent with a sixteen year-old girl while he was still married. As I read his poems and studied his biography I found it hard at 16 not to want to be Shelly.

On the syllabus, we were given an assignment that was to be completed during the Christmas break. We were to bring in a poster that reflected some piece of literature we had studied during the term. In November, when the trees stood as “bare ruined choirs” to nature’s whims, I asked Daddy to purchase several small tubes of glitter and some Elmer’s Glue. “What will you do with that?” he asked. “Miss Patterson wants us to produce a poster that catches the essence of some work of literature we have studied so far this term. It is due at the beginning of the January semester,” I said. The Christmas break began in mid-December, and I still had not received the glitter. Daddy must have forgotten about my request, because when I asked him to buy some glitter, he again asked why. This time, I had a better response. I said, “We read Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ in class, and there is a description of Hell in the poem that would make a nice poster.” I had never turned in a poster or any extra credit work in any grade in school, but I wanted to do a rendering of Milton’s Hell as the poet had described it in his poem. On New Year’s Eve, I found a large bag on the table at my place. I opened it, and inside, I found five different tubes of glitter, some glue, and a watercolor set. Over the course of the next several days, I put together my work. I brought the finished product out to the dinner table



and explained what it meant. Everyone was enthusiastic about how I had interpreted Milton's hell.

English IV was the first class of the day. That first class also marked the beginning of the second semester of the academic year. Miss Patterson took roll, and then said, "Please bring up your projects." The class let out a roar in two flavors. The most vociferous roar came from the students who had done the project over the Christmas holiday, but were unaware that it was due on this day. The second roar came from the students who had not read the syllabus, and their roar had more the sound of "huh?" No a single student had come to school that day with a finished project. Miss Patterson had always been very kind and agreeable in class until that day. She said, "The syllabus clearly states that the project is due today." Then one of the students, a young woman decided to argue the point. "Miss Patterson, I have the syllabus here in my hand. I also have a completed project at home, but your syllabus does not state that it is due today. In fact, your syllabus does not give any due date. However, I can go to the office and call my mother, and she will have the project here before class is over."

I liked Miss Patterson a lot, but I had also wondered when the project was due. I assumed that we would be told the due date once the semester began. "Well, I have been teaching here for twenty years, and I have never had a class have this problem before. When else would you have thought it was due if not today? As none of you are ready with your projects, I will give you until the start of class tomorrow to turn in your projects. After eight o'clock tomorrow morning, the grade

becomes a zero.” With those words, the second semester began. The following morning, nearly 30 of us turned in our project. The following Monday, we found our artwork hung on the classroom walls. Most of the posters reflected a lack of interest in the English class or the work they represented. There were several Lady Macbeths with blood-dappled fingers. Four of us had chosen “Paradise Lost” as a theme, and I found it amazing how differently we all represented our interpretation of Hades. One student had cleverly dyed four lumps of sugar red and made that the center of a fiery Hell. While each of our works was different, I was still proud of what I had done. Miss Patterson said that she would leave the posters on the wall until after the Parent-Teacher Conference that would be held on Thursday. I was thrilled that my parents would see my work on the wall.

Tyron Knight and I hung out with each other at lunchtime. We used to eat in the cafeteria and then spend the rest of the time before the bell walking around in the neighborhood near the school. During class in late March, Miss Patterson asked Tyron and me to see her at lunchtime. “Just come to the faculty lounge and knock on the door. Tell whoever opens the door you are looking for me. They will know what to do.” That day, as directed, Tyron and I went to the faculty lounge, and knocked on the door. We told the teacher who opened the door we were there for Miss Patterson. The teacher told us to wait and closed the door. Miss Patterson soon appeared. She told us she needed us to do some “housekeeping” for her. “I have stacks of student projects that I need to get rid of or I won’t have any room for future projects.” She fumbled through her purse, and found a key ring, and removed

one key from the ring. “This opens the door to the classroom and the storage locker in the room. I want you boys to remove all the projects on the shelves in the storage locker and take them over to the incinerator behind the school. I use these things to make the room look nice on Parent’s Night, but I have years of junk that I need to get rid of now. When you’re done, come back here and return the key.” We “Yes ma’amed” her and headed off to the classroom. From floor to top shelf, the storage closet was full of posters similar to the one I had recently done. Tyron and I grabbed armfuls of papers and made our way to the incinerator. One trip, I lost my grip of the posters just before the incinerator door, and my load dropped on the cement floor. On top of the pile of posters was the one that I had turned in. “Hey these are ours,” I said. “Let’s look for our grade.” I flipped mine over, but I did not see a grade. Tyron found his, and his was ungraded too. Then as we went through the pile, we noticed that none of the projects had a grade on them. Tyron said, “Well, Hell’s bells. She ain’t marked a single one of these. What a bitch. All these were to her was decorations on the wall for our parents, to make it look like we were doing something important in her class.” I agreed with Tyron, but I still felt proud of my effort. I still enjoyed “Paradise Lost,” but Miss Patterson descended from the demigod status I had reserved for her to the role of mere mortal. As I returned the key to her, I knew that from then on every word she spoke would be weighed on the scale of cynicism. Somewhere I would read, “Nine hundred and ninety-nine attaboys can be wiped out by one awe-shit!”

## 42

Occasionally, I would hear Mommy and Daddy talk about where they would retire. Mostly Daddy talked, and mostly Mommy agreed with what Daddy had to say. Brian and I really wanted to go to LA, because our next-door neighbor, Bill Staunton, came from LA, and the stories he told about LA were to our ears what Scheherazade's stories were to her prince. Life was larger than real in LA; it was surreal Bill told us. There was no humidity and it was never cold. "A hot day is any day over eighty-five degrees, but then there is always the beach if it gets hot. And what's at the beach? Babes. Mile after mile of babes." When we learned that Daddy had nixed LA from his list we weren't surprised. Any place that was fun was beyond Daddy's understanding. He taught us that on the long drive across the US when we were ninety minutes from Disneyland, half an hour from the Grand Canyon, ten minutes from the meteor crater outside Winslow, Arizona, and as we passed through the Painted Desert at sixty mile per hour while Daddy blah, blah, blahed about getting to his brother's house in Tacoma, Washington.

Daddy told Mommy he did not want to retire in San Antonio, because there were over a hundred generals living in the area. He wanted a fresh start. It looked like it would be Austin, Texas for our family. In late January, Daddy came home very excited. "Mayme, Aetna has offered me a job in Tampa, Florida. I will be an hour from my folks in Brooksville. To start, they will pay me nearly triple my Army salary, plus I will have my Army retirement check. We can buy a house on the cheap

there. They have a low cost of living, and there is no state income tax or sales tax. We will be rich. There's a junior college across the bay in Saint Petersburg. Timmy and Brian can go to school there if they want to go to college."

I had never heard of Tampa, Florida. I began to wonder how Brian and I would get to the junior college especially since Daddy had not allowed me to learn how to drive. The one and only occasion that I approached the subject had a very ugly ending. I asked Daddy if I could learn to drive. He told me that I could only learn to drive if I had a B average in high school. For a few seconds, I said nothing, then foolishly I asked, "Why did you not let Jeannie drive? She made the National Honor Society." He replied, "Oh! Just throw my dead daughter in my face." Then he walked away. He never answered my question, and I never drove while in high school.

Regarding the two questions that I had posed for myself on the walk home after the SAT, one of them now had an answer. Where: Tampa, Florida. I still needed to know "How." A look at the map made it clear that the only way to Saint Petersburg would be by car. Busses would not do. I knew that Daddy had no money for a second car. I knew that Daddy had made no plans for me to go to college. That was clear when he had me sign up for drafting and typing classes and suggested that I not take physics. He might have been right about physics being beyond my ability at that time.

Every Friday morning, there was a pep rally at Killeen High School in the gymnasium. In addition to lifting the spirits of the student body so that we would go

out and cheer for our sports teams, the principal would make announcements about students who had received scholarships to universities and colleges. On the last Friday in January, one of the students recognized was Barbara Johnson. "Barbara has received a music scholarship from the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida," the principal said. We all cheered for Barbara. I knew Barbara as a student who rode my bus to school, but I had not spoken to her very much. She was quiet and seemed to not be interested in making friends. On the bus ride home that afternoon, I congratulated her on her success at earning a scholarship and asked her why she was going to that college. During the twenty-minute ride home, Barbara told me everything she knew about the school and its admissions process. As she exited the bus, she said, "I will bring you my college catalog Monday, so you can look it over."

When I got on the bus on Monday, Barbara greeted me with the catalog in her hand. I could not remember a more generous act by another human being, and was delighted that she had remembered her promise to me about the catalog. During my two study halls that day, I read the catalog especially the section about admission to the university. Before I left school that day, I had typed my letter of application. At home that afternoon, I found an envelope and addressed it to the admissions department of the University. I stapled a five-dollar bill to my letter then I walked to the Post Office to mail the letter. The Post Office was located near the Army-Air Force Cafeteria. After I put my letter in the mail, I stopped in at the cafeteria for a soda. Outside the entrance to the cafeteria, there was a cork bulletin board with

miscellaneous messages stapled, taped, and pinned to it. One stood out from the others: "Cafeteria Help Wanted." I pulled the sign off the board and read it, and then I folded it and put it in my pocket. The next day when school was over, I rode the school bus to the cafeteria stop. I went into the office and requested an application for the job. The office worker gave me the application and then asked, "Are you going to apply for the job?" I told her I was. "You know sugar, this is a bus boy and dish washer job. It don't pay much either, jus' a dolla'one a hour," she said. I replied, "That's okay with me. I need the job." She laughed at my eagerness, and gave me the paperwork. Since leaving Alaska and giving up my job as a bag boy at the commissary I had had only one job. It was seasonal and I only earned ten dollars a weekend at it. Now my only source of income was begging my parents for money. The dishwasher job would give me a chance to earn money and to pay for college. When I left the office, I walked over to the bank and opened a savings account with a deposit of ten dollars.

Mommy was making dinner when I arrived home, and I started to set the table. "It's a bit early for that, isn't it?" Mommy asked.

"I want to get this done, because I have to ask you something," I told her and continued to set the table. When I was done, I went into the kitchen, and told her that I had found a job. "Why do you want a job?" she asked.

"I need money to go to college, and I don't feel confident that Daddy will have money for me. So I will get my own money and use it to go to college," I told her.

“I don’t think you father will approve of you working while you are in school. Can’t you wait until school is over, and then go get a job,” she said.

“No, Mommy. If I wait, there won’t be any jobs, because, as all of my classmates come to the realization that they are going to need money to go to college, they will all be out looking for jobs. This one is available now, and I want it. There are no other jobs that I know of right now, and when school is out there will be even fewer jobs. If I can’t pay my way to college, no one else will, and you know it. I need this job,” I said firmly.

“Well, let’s see if you get the job before we mention this to your father,” Mommy said. I felt like I had a partial victory with those words. Mommy was not outright against me having a job.

That night after Daddy went to bed, I filled out the application for Food Handler 1, aka Busboy and Dishwasher. The fine print said an employee had to be eighteen in order to work for the cafeteria. I was seventeen. I knew if they asked to see my dependent’s ID card, I would be denied the job, so in the morning, I told Mommy I was not feeling well and wanted to stay home. Then as she watched the *Today Show*, I slipped into her bedroom and took my birth certificate from her jewelry box. For the next hour, I practiced copying a 6 onto my birth certificate where there used to be a 7 before I erased it. After more than a hundred practice attempts, I was certain that I could land the 6 exactly where it was supposed to be so that it appeared that I was born in 1946 instead of 1947. I knew that my entire future depended on where the 6 ended up on my birth certificate. I had one and



only one opportunity to get it right. If I failed, I had no one to blame but myself. I said a prayer and firmly pressed the 6 on my portable typewriter being ever so thankful that the birth certificate was typed using courier font, the same font as my typewriter's.

The key exploded onto the birth certificate with a sound of finality. I looked down, and noticed that the key was still on the paper. I lifted my finger from the key and released the paper from the typewriter and pulled it free. To my amazement, the 6 was perfectly placed. It would have fooled even the Bureau of Vital Statistics of the state of Virginia, the issuing agency!

To deliver my application, I wore a white shirt and tie. Over this, I put on my sports jacket. As I left the house, I told Mommy I would be back in an hour. "Where are you going?" she asked. "To get a job," I replied.

When I got to the cafeteria office, the same woman greeted me who had given me the application the day before. "Back so soon, sugar?" she said. I told her that I had completed the application and wanted to turn it in. She rose from her desk, and looked at me in a strange way. She squinted her eyes as if she were seeing someone other than the boy she had seen the day before. "Yo' sure dressed nice," she said as she took the application from my hand. She checked each item on the application. "You left this part blank," she said pointing to the time of day that I would be able to work. I told her that I could work anytime after four o'clock during the week, and any time on the weekend, but there was not a blank for that. "It don't matter sugar, they need people real bad, and the fact that you want to work is what they looking

for.” I smiled politely trying not to let on my desperation for the job. She signed the bottom of the document, and said, “Mr. Orzack might call you tonight about this job. He’s real nice. Just answer his questions as best you can, and you’ll do all right. See you soon.” I had my birth certificate in the envelope that I had carried my application in, but she did not ask to see it, so I did not offer to show it to her. I thanked her for her help, and went back home.

Mommy greeted me when I got home with, “A Mr. Orzack called and asked for you. Here’s his number. He wants you to call him as soon as you can.” I took off my sports jacket and sat in a chair next to the phone and called Mr. Orzack. The call lasted less than a minute. He was happy to hire a high school senior who was going to college and needed the money. I would start the next day.

“Mommy, I got the job,” I shouted after I hung up. Mommy gave me a hug, and said, “I sure hope we can convince your father to let you work while you’re in school.”

“I finish all my homework in my two study halls,” I said. “I have not done any homework this semester at home. There is no reason for Daddy to say no. My grades are good. I will pass everything. He can’t say no.”

Mommy said, “Let me talk to him about this before you do.” I told Mommy, “Okay, but I am going to work tomorrow. I don’t care what Daddy says.” Late that night, I could hear Mommy and Daddy talking, but I could not make out their words. I heard my name several times, so I was sure they were talking about the job, but

Daddy did not come out of the bedroom to speak with me, so I had to wait until the next day for an answer from him.

“Why didn’t you talk to me about this first, before you went and filled out the application,” Daddy asked.

“Because you would have said ‘no,’ and I did not want to disobey you by applying for this job,” I said. That seemed to slow down the Daddy steamroller for a moment.

“I am against you working while you are going to school. Your grades will suffer, and you will never get into a college if that happens,” he said calmly. Before I could reply, Mommy said, “Gene, do you recall the grades Timmy made last year while you were on Operation Desert Strike?”

“Yeah, what’s that got to do with anything?” Daddy asked, now starting to warm up a bit seeing that his Prime Minister was beginning to abandon the party line!

“Just this. Timmy seems to do best when is he under pressure. While you were gone on Desert Strike, he worked weekends at Comanche Gap. He did not make much, but he had a job that kept him from doing his schoolwork, and yet he got the best grades of his life. I think we should let him have this job. He needs the money for college, and he’s willing to work for it.”

Now feeling completely betrayed by his wife and oldest son, Daddy said angrily, “Fine. If that’s how you want it, just remember this. This is your baby. I want nothing to do with it.” He then grabbed his keys and stormed out of the house,

but not before he slammed the front door hard enough to rattle every pane of glass in the duplex. I was calm as Daddy left the house, but on the inside I was dancing a jig of joy and victory. I had won a huge prize. I now had the answer to the second question I posed to myself as I walked home from the early November SAT. "How" had been answered when Daddy left for work that morning.

As a dishwasher, I did everything I was told to do. I began to make friends with some of the people who worked at the cafeteria as regulars. I was the only child on the staff. It seemed that everyone went by first names. No formalities. Beverly made the bread and rolls, Tommy worked as a busboy too even though he was a soldier. There were others too. Rufus, who everyone thought was dumb as dirt and was. Billy and Sneed worked with me some nights. I was the only member of the evening staff who worked every day. I worked from four o'clock to nine o'clock Monday through Friday. On Saturday and Sunday I worked from six in the morning to four in the afternoon. Three weeks after I started working, my first paycheck came. I picked it up before I began work, and walked it over to the bank and deposited it without cashing it. Even when I quit in late July, I had never seen a penny from a pay check. I enjoyed the ritual of taking the check to the bank and depositing it in my savings account. I kept the little passbook hidden in my sock drawer in a pair of socks I never wore. Every fourteen days, my balance grew by seventy-four dollars.

The same week that I started my job, I came home from work one evening and at my place on the dining room table was a package with the logo of the

University of South Florida emblazoned on it. I carefully opened it and removed its contents. They had sent a college catalog and an application blank along with a letter wishing me success in my admissions efforts. Before I went to bed that night, I completed the application and had placed it in the envelope that came with the application. The next morning, I asked Mommy if she would write me a check so I could send the university its application fee. "I will get money from my savings account to repay you," I told her. She surprised me with what she said next. "Daddy said he would pay the application fee." Mommy wrote out the check and I stapled it to the application. When I went to work that day, I mailed the application. I took the transcript request form to school and gave it to the Registrar along with an envelope from the university.

I came home from work one evening in late March to find a large, important looking envelope at my place at the table. The return address was the University of South Florida. I was gripped with both fear and joy. I took my dinner knife and carefully slid it through the opening at the top of the envelope and began to cut. I reached in and pulled out a letter that began, "We are pleased to announce..." I was going to college! I leaped out of my chair and did a spontaneous dance around the dinner table for several minutes. I had no one to share my good news with until the next morning as everyone was already in bed. I left the letter at Daddy's place so that he would find it the next morning while he drank his coffee.

The next day, I returned Barbara's college catalog to her and, I beamed with joy as I showed her my acceptance letter. She was genuinely pleased for me. During

the bus ride to school that morning, we talked about graduation. I had no plans to attend the after graduation party planned by the mothers of the graduating class, but as Barbara began to explain it to me, it began to sound like it would be fun. First there would be a dance. Even though the school did not sanction dancing, (most of the civilian population was Southern Baptist and they frowned on dancing) the mothers decided that a dance for the graduates would be appropriate. I wondered what kind of dancing we would be doing, as there were no local "rock n' roll" stations. My radio strained each night just to pick up the weak signal from the Waco, Texas station only forty miles away. This station played the top forty songs, but it was so far away that I heard as much static as I did music when I would listen to it. Still it was better than listening to religious radio or Country music with songs like "Does you chewing gum lose it flavor on the bedpost over night?"

After the dance, we would go to see *Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte* with Betty Davis and Joan Crawford. The movie was supposed to be scary. Later we would go bowling at the bowling alley at Fort Hood. After bowling we would have a pancake breakfast served to us by the mothers of the graduating class at the Officers' Club situated near the bowling alley. I thought about the evening and decided it would be more fun than to go the graduation party than stay at home with my parents and maternal aunts from Chicago who planned to join us at my graduation. I had not had a real date since tenth grade, but I decided that I would ask Barbara to be my date for the senior graduation night festivities. On the ride home from school, I sat with her and asked her if she had plans for graduation evening. She said she was

going, but had no date. "Would you like to go with me," I managed to say. She told me she would have to check with her father, also a Sergeant Major in the Army, to see if it was all right with him. On the ride to school the next day, I learned that I had a date for the graduation night party. More than anything, I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be like other people. Unfortunately, I did not know what normal was and often found myself acting inappropriately because of my own ignorance rather than a short circuit in my behavioral logic. When Barbara said she would go with me to the party, a sense of being normal came over me. Whatever demons I struggled with (mostly planted by seventeen years of my father's negative talk, my mother's passiveness, an Irish-Catholic culture, and my family's weirdness about sex talk) had been sent to limbo at least until after the graduation party. I would pass for normal.

Bill Gaines was a senior in my class. Like me, he too was graduating in a week. As we rode home from school, I asked him why he sometimes got off the bus at a stop about a mile from his home. "Oh, that because I work at the Officers' Club two nights a week," he said.

"You have a job?" I asked trying to conceal my amazement. It was not that I felt Bill was defective, but I did not know there were any other jobs on the post for high school students.

"Yeah. It's pretty lame though. I bus tables at the Officers' Club after people are done with their meals. I'm thinking about quitting though," he said.

"Why is that?" I asked.

“My boss doesn’t like me wearing sun glasses when I work. I think he’s an asshole. He says I have to make a decision about working or wearing sunglasses. I think I’m going to quit.”

I asked, “What do you do with your money? Are you saving for college or what?”

“No, not for college. I have an aunt who says she will help me with my college bills. Right now, all I want to do is get the hell out of here, out of the Army. I want to see the world. Well, at least America. To do that I need a car and my old man says he’s not buying me a car.”

“How long have you been working at the O-Club?” I asked.

“I just started a couple of weeks ago. You know, I hate how they ride you for every little thing. They think they own you just because they give you a little money. Hey, here’s my stop,” he said as he got off the bus. As he receded from view, I saw him pull up his collar James Dean-like, and then he adjusted his sunglasses before he headed up the hill to the O-Club. I wondered what it was like to have an aunt who would pay for college. I wondered what it would be like to earn money just to spend it. I wondered what I would spend my money on if someone wanted to pay my college bills. Bill was one of five high school seniors at Fort Hood who I knew who had a job. That meant that hundreds did not have jobs.

Daddy’s retirement was planned for July 31. In early June, he stopped going in to work everyday. Instead he would lay out in the front yard and get a tan. I



asked him about this, and he said, "There's a new Sergeant Major in the Battalion. He's got to learn the ropes. If I'm there, he can't learn. He needs to make his own way. In August, he's going to be in Viet Nam along with the rest of the division. He needs to get his priorities straight while we are here, because once he's in Viet Nam, he won't have time to get things straight. He'll be dead." Daddy paused, and then he said, "Go get the chess set. Let's see if I can beat you today." I went in and retrieved my chess set and set it up on a parson's table next to Daddy's chaise lounge. The game did not last long. I played white and opened with my Queen's pawn, and the game was over in twenty moves when Daddy conceded. We played another game, but Daddy seemed to have lost interest in chess and was soon in trouble in the second game. I found black harder to play because it always seemed to be on the defensive, but I won this game in about thirty moves. The phone rang as we were setting up the board for a third game, and I went inside to answer it.

"Hello Tim, this is Bob Orzack. I was wondering if you might be free this morning."

"Yes, Mr. Orzack. I am free. What can I do for you?"

Bob said, "Well, we had some problems up at Belton Lake due to the flooding in May and early this month, and our concession has been closed for about six weeks, and it needs to be cleaned up. I need someone to go with me to clean the place up, so we can reopen it this weekend."

"Mr. Orzack, I can be at work in fifteen minutes if you want."

“Well, I was wondering if I couldn’t just pick you up. Give me your address. I can be there in less than five minutes.” I gave him my address and hung up the phone. I changed into my blue jeans and put on my tennis shoes. When I went outside to tell Daddy about the call, Mr. Orzack had already pulled up in his pick-up truck and was talking to Daddy when I left the house. I waved good-bye to Daddy as we pulled away.

From the descriptions I had heard on the TV about the flooding at Lake Belton, I was expecting boulders, mud, debris flows, and downed trees to be strewn across the road miles before we arrived at the lake. What we saw instead was a peaceful, unobstructed drive all the way to the concession stand. When we went inside the building, nothing seemed to be out of place. All the tables had red and white-checkered table clothes; the napkin holders were all empty as were the salt and peppershakers. Bob, told me to go out back and fetch a couple of garbage cans. I brought two galvanized thirty-two gallon cans into the store and moved them up toward the check out counter. Mr. Orzack began to fling bags of chips and candy to me. I scooped these into the cans. We filled both garbage cans twice with outdated products. Then we washed down the checkout counter and knocked down the spider webs that had grown in the corners in the absence of human presence. Mr. Orzack asked, “You ever had a suicide?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, “ I said trying to be polite thinking this was a strange question. Then Mr. Orzack took a paper cup and began to fill it with several ounces of each type of soda flavoring at the soda fountain. He pushed a cup

brimming with dark soda toward me. "Here, try this," he said. I began to gulp down the liquid. While it tasted strange, as only a mixture of orange, cola, Dr. Pepper, and root beer can, I told him it tasted all right to me. "Good, that means we don't need to change out any of the tanks." Let's go back to the post now. I want us to clean out the concession at the football field next."

I was familiar with the football field at Fort Hood. My brother and I would go there to watch football games. When we arrived at the field, Mr. Orzack said, "They played their last game here in November, but no one thought to return the inventory to the Main Exchange. So we're going to have to do the same thing here as we did at Belton Lake." I found a large garbage can behind the concession and we began to fill it. I had to empty it several times before we had removed all the spoiled items from the sales racks. Mr. Orzack had a clipboard and marked down on it how much of each item we tossed out just as he had at Belton Lake. We swept the floor before we left. When I got in the truck, Bob started talking, "You know, I called all the other people who work at the Cafeteria first before I called you to come in today. Every single one of them said they couldn't make it or didn't want to come in. You were the last person I called, and the first to say 'yes.' I don't know about the others, but I can tell you really want to work, so from now on, you are the only person I will call for extra work. I'm going to take you back to the cafeteria. You can start now, even though your shift doesn't begins until 4 o'clock today. Just sign in for all the hours you worked today when you get there."

“Yes, sir. I will do that. Thanks for calling me,” I said feeling pretty good about life at that moment.

## 43

The movers came once again. A large van pulled up in front of the house and for the tenth time in my memory, all of our possessions would be placed onboard a van and hauled halfway across the continent. Mommy had already removed the curtains and rods from the windows. The mover brought in dozens of boxes, spools of tape, and hand-trucks to haul things away with before they began their labor.

After the van arrived, I went over to the cafeteria to get my last paycheck. Then I took it to the bank and deposited it. Once I had done that, I asked for a cashier’s check for the full balance of my savings account. When I left the bank, I held in my hand an envelope that had a check for over \$1200. This represented all my labor since February. It represented all the cash I had received for my seventeenth birthday and high school graduation. It represented what was left over from my days as a bag boy. It represented my future as a student at a college. It was a down payment on four years of higher education that I hoped would lead me to a new world. I vowed to myself that I would tell no one how much money I had.

When I returned to our empty house at two o’clock, the movers were gone. We had packed our suitcases the night before, and these were now neatly stacked in the back of our 1963 Dodge Dart Station Wagon. We all grabbed brooms and mops

and began to sweep and wash the floors in anticipation of the Housing Inspection Team. They arrived at half past three and were gone in fifteen minutes.

Brian and I had spent the previous week saying good-bye to our friends. Even though we had only been at Fort Hood for eighteen months, we had made many friends. For me it was a turning point in my life. I had gained a measure of independence from my family especially my father. I had even argued him to a stop and caused him to reverse course on several occasions. I had thought out how I would conduct and support my college career. I had a plan for my life.

We all piled into the car and headed to the motel room that Daddy had reserved for us. For dinner, Daddy took us to the NCO Club. It was all you can eat shrimp night. Brian and I fed like baleen whales as we swallowed a gallon of those pink delicacies. As I finished my meal, I wondered why we didn't eat shrimp more often on Fridays since it tasted so good. It would remain an unanswered mystery of my childhood.

The next morning, we rose at six o'clock. All four of us slept in the same room. Brian and I slept on cots that the manager brought in the night before. Mommy asked Daddy how he slept. "I had a terrible night's sleep," he said. "I kept waking up thinking about Mom. It was strange. I don't think I got two hours of sleep the whole night." Mommy said, "Well, we'll see Mom in a couple of days."

Daddy put on his uniform and asked Mommy how he looked. "You look marvelous, darling. In fact, I'm not letting you out of my sight. Don't want some twenty-two year old broad stealing you from me." Then they both laughed. Brian

and I had never seen Mommy and Daddy act like this before. Daddy seemed giddy with excitement over his retirement ceremony that would take place in a few hours. Mommy seemed happy to be leaving the Army for the normalcy of civilian life.

At the parade field at Fort Hood at 0900 hours, hundreds of people assembled to watch the retirement ceremony of a dozen soldiers whose combined service to their nation was more than 250 years, more years of service than the nation had existed. These soldiers had seen action in WWII and Korea in addition to many close calls for war during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. A remote land called Viet Nam had set in motion the mass retirement of much of the senior leadership of this outfit. When Daddy's division was ordered to Viet Nam, Daddy said, "I think two World Wars is enough for any soldier." The next day he submitted his letter of retirement. The review stand was far from where we sat. When Daddy was called up to receive his retirement papers, we did not see him. In addition to the hundreds of spectators and family members, there were several thousand soldiers on the parade ground for this ceremony. They all wore their helmets, and carried their rifles impressively. As each retiree's name was called, there was a loud ovation and much cheering. When they called Daddy's name, Mommy shouted, "Yippee, Gene." Brian and I yelled, "Yeah for Daddy!"

The ceremony was only minutes from being over when a soldier approached us and asked Mommy, "Are you Mrs. Heath, Sergeant Major Heath's wife?"

Mommy alarmed answered, "Yes, I am. Is there a problem?"

“Ma’am please come with me. We have an urgent message from the Red Cross for the Sergeant Major.”

“Kids, stay here. I will be right back,” Mommy said. The look on her face reminded me of the look on her face when we waited for Jeannie’s plane on June 3, 1963, at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Brian and I looked at each other. “What do you think it means?” I asked. Brian did not answer. We sat in our chairs as the crowd began to disburse. Within minutes, the reviewing stand was deserted, but we had not seen Daddy. Then we saw Mommy and Daddy approaching us. They looked somber. We could not imagine what trouble they had heard.

As Mommy reached us, all she said was “Grandma is dead, boys.” We were stunned. Brian began to cry. I just sat quietly in my chair and wondered why Daddy’s life was so hard. Brian and I got up and gave Daddy a hug and told him we were sad his mother was gone. If only she could have held on for one more day, Daddy could have said good-bye to her. We drove back to the motel and changed our clothes. The festive mood had given way to somber melancholy. Though I had papered over the hole in my heart where my sister once resided, I felt the same sense of loss now that my grandmother was gone.

We placed our suitcases back into the car while Daddy paid the bill. The manager said he had received a number of calls for Daddy, and handed him a stack of pink pieces of paper from the various callers. They all bore the same message: “Call home.” The first message came only minutes after we left for the retirement ceremony that morning.

Daddy got in the car and handed Mommy the pink phone message slips. She shuffled through them like a deck of cards. "What do you think happened?" Mommy asked. "I guess we'll find out tonight when I call from the motel," Daddy said. Then he started the car and pulled out onto the highway. To no one in particular, almost like a prayer, he said, "This is almost too much."

As we pulled away from the motel, sadness overcame me. I had dreams and hopes and plans for my life. My future was about to begin. What assurance did I have that my life would not turn out like my father's? As our drive for the day came to an end, I watched the sunset through the rear window of our car. The fiery sky, mad with a dozen variations of pink, reminded me of the phone messages Daddy received from the motel clerk.



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