

The background of the entire image is a dense layer of light-colored gravel and wood chips, typical of a garden bed or a walkway. The particles are irregular in shape and size, creating a textured, granular appearance. A white horizontal band is centered across the image, containing the text.

Part One



On the day that I finally reached heaven, no one was watching, which is what my mom said always happened with great achievements. I pedaled over to Jonathon and Jesse. They were looking away from me, toward the far end of the bike jumps, eyebrows dipped into unibrows.

“Did you see me?” I said. “Made it to heaven. I touched the bottom branch.”

“That’s not heaven anymore,” Jesse said over his shoulder. “Heaven’s the third branch.”

“I thought Ms. Universe’s underpants was the third branch.”

“You weren’t here yesterday. Heaven now comes after Ms. Universe’s underpants. The first branch isn’t anything, but in order for it to count, you have to touch it and say ‘Olivia Newton-John’ three times. Also, both wheels have to be in the air. Then you can try for Ms. Universe’s underpants.”

The rules were always changing, but usually I got a vote in how. The day before, unfortunately, I had to straighten up my room, clean the bathroom, and mow the back lawn with our stupid push mower.

“Them.” Jonathon nodded toward the distance. “They’re why we changed the rules.”

I pushed between Jonathon and Jesse and scanned the drainage gulch below. A group of Mexicans were standing on the opposite hill, on Tina Turner’s Tabletop. Tina Turner’s Tabletop was more of a ridge, made flat by the weight of a busted yellow bulldozer that had been there before even Tina Turner was born. It was the steepest side of the gulch, therefore the best starting point for the jumps.

Since the Mexicans were all standing in a row, the difference in their sizes and widths was more noticeable. Some were as tall as Jesse and me, and others were as short as third graders. They all had different haircuts or T-shirts and different-colored shoes or jackets but the same light brown skin.

“They were here yesterday,” Jesse grumbled. “Them and their Huffys.”

I couldn’t think of a single white kid who would ride a Huffy within a mile of the jumps. In fact, I knew of only two white kids who owned Huffys, Orson Meyer and Carletta Mure, but no one took them seriously because they were Mormons.

“Look at ’em.” Jonathon scowled, the freckles on his forehead coming together.

“They should get their own jumps,” Jesse added.

“Look at ’em.”

The three of us watched now as the oldest-looking Mexican crossed himself, started running, leaped on his Huffy, and plowed into the first jump. Before his front wheel even left the ground, his feet came off the pedals, and he crashed. Jonathon cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Burrito bikers!”

“Stupid, stupid,” Jesse muttered.

The shortest Mexican went next. He got a good start, barreled full speed into the first jump, flipped, and landed on his face. Jonathon and Jesse belted out, “HA-HA, HARDY HAR HAR HAR HAR!”

A third Mexican attempted the jumps, but crashed so bad that he writhed around on the ground for several minutes. There was blood coming out of his knee, and we were all silent, waiting to see if he would die.

“HA-HA, HARDY HAR HAR HAR!”

That was when the Mexicans picked up rocks and sticks and started marching in our direction.

“See?” Jesse said. “They have no respect.”

“Beaner bikers!”

We offered the Mexicans our middle finger and rode away.



At the Dolly Madison Ice Cream Parlor they had the only double-decker, double chocolate-dipped Deuteronomy Delights in all of Denver. The owners, Gretchen and Clara, had hearing aids the size of car stereos and matching buttons that said MY BOSS IS A JEWISH CARPENTER. Jonathon, Jesse, and I plopped down on our regular vinyl stools as if we had just worked an eight-hour shift moving pianos.

“*Soldier of Fortune!*”

Jonathon headed toward a full rack of *Highlights* and *Rocky Mountain Hunter* magazines. Since he was skinnier than Jesse and me, he slid between the counter and the stools and reached for the magazine. Strands of his big old fluffy red hair got in my face.

“You got lice as big as mice.”

We ordered three Deuteronomy Delights and went through the entire issue of *Soldier of Fortune*. Jesse and Jonathon went through it once more, just in case they had missed any hunting knives or submachine guns.

“What does this mean?” Jesse asked, studying the headline on the cover. “‘S.O.F. Fires Up Russians in Afghanistan.’”

Below the headline was a photo of an American on the back of a camel. He was wearing Arabian clothes and holding an assault rifle in the air while a group of Arab-looking soldiers cheered him on.

“That guy,” Jonathon said, tapping his finger against the American on the camel, “is helping those guys”—he circled his finger over the cheering Arab guys—“kill Russians.”

“Cool.”

“On camels.”

“Cool times two.”

Jonathon asked Clara, in his loudest voice, if he could have the *Soldier of Fortune* to use for a class project. She told him to be her guest. He rolled it up and stuffed it in his back pocket.

I ate my Deuteronomy Delight and said, “Nerd lichyth evol.”

“Samuel’s speaking pig Latin.”

I pointed to the golden plaque on the wall behind me reflecting “Love Thy Children” onto the mirror behind the counter. Jonathon and Jesse began repeating “Nerd lichyth evol” until Gretchen brought us three plastic cups of water and we downed them like outlaws at a whiskey bar.



People were always dumping half-full bottles of scotch, eight-track tapes, Polaroids, lottery tickets, and old televisions right behind the YMCA, which was a short ride from the Dolly Madison.

“There should be laws,” Jonathon said as we rode. “No Mexicans allowed on bike jumps.”

“That’s why we changed the order of the branches,” Jesse told me. “We made it impossible to get to heaven if you’re on a Huffy.”

“Heaven on a Huffy.” It sounded so funny. “Heaven on a Huffy. Huffy Heaven.”

When we got to the big pile of trash behind the YMCA, I found a mud-covered lighter, wiped it off, and put it in my pocket. Jesse found a cowboy boot with no heel. Jonathon found a mixing bowl.

I tried to ignite three damp bundles of old towels in the YMCA Dumpster, holding my new lighter against them until it ran out of gas. Then I held my arms out and balanced on the yellow parking lines, one foot following the other. If I fell I'd be dead.

Jonathon and Jesse started throwing lit matches at each other. When they ran out of matches, Jesse threw a rock at Jonathon. Then Jonathon threw a handful of gravel.

“Hey!”

Mr. Holland appeared from nowhere. Even parents were afraid of Mr. Holland, the YMCA manager, because he was a Korean War vet and sometimes stole tomatoes from people's gardens. A gook had shot off half his nose and now he hocked loogeys the same way Sugar Ray Leonard spit blood.

“It's craaaazzzzy Chuck Norris!” Jonathon yelled as loudly as he could. “Run. Run. He'll slice our throats with bamboo.”

We streaked like Flash Gordons. When I looked over my shoulder to see if Mr. Holland was following us, I saw flames flickering through the metal lids of the Dumpster. Mr. Holland was standing next to the Dumpster, shaking a black Wiffle ball bat in our direction.

Jonathon, Jesse, and I scaled the fence, leaped onto a dirt path, and clambered through the gulch reeds, across the water, over the bike jumps, and up onto Tina Turner's Tabletop, far on the other side of the drainage gulch. From there, we could safely see the plumes of smoke rising from the towels in the Dumpster.

“Who lit the Dumpster on fire?” Jesse asked.

“Samuel.”

“Nice job.”

“Thanks.”

"I'm not afraid of you!" Jesse yelled at Mr. Holland, now that we were a million thousand miles away.

We sat down on two half-sunken tires and caught our breath. There were sparrows flying everywhere. They were making more noise than Mr. Holland.

After a while, Jesse pointed in the direction of the YMCA and murmured, "No . . ."

The Mexicans had appeared at the top of the hill, just behind Mr. Holland. Mr. Holland, who was now pouring buckets of water into the Dumpster, had his back to the Mexicans, so he couldn't see them waving at us.

"If they do . . ."

"What?" I asked. "What? What?"

The Mexicans leaned their Huffys against the wall of the YMCA and inspected our unlocked bikes. Jonathon whistled through his teeth.

"No, no, no . . ."

"They're gonna steal our bikes!" I said, standing.

"It's Mr. Obvious."

"Beaner bastards!"

The Mexicans started laughing. And the three of us watched as they rode away on our super-expensive, ultralight, professional BMX bikes, leaving us with three stupid Huffys.



My mother said that our street, Cleaver, was named after Eldridge Cleaver, the famous black activist, while my dad claimed the name was from the Cleaver family on *Leave It to Beaver*. Our mailman, Mr. McElvoney, whose bottles of schnapps scented our bills mint and peach, said "Cleaver" was derived from the tools of a notorious Denver butcher who minced adolescent boys.

"If he's so smart," my mom said when I repeated Mr. McElvoney's Cleaver version, "why does he always mix our mail with the Bernards'?"

The Bernards were two brothers, seven houses down, who drove Datsuns that spewed flames from the tailpipes. They also owned a whole gang of Rottweilers. They were never home and the dogs were always outside.

I rode back from the YMCA, along Cleaver, on one of the Huffys the Mexicans had left behind. The rear rim had a flat spot that thumped the ground, and the handlebars were so loose that they easily flopped backward or forward, depending on which way you leaned.

I stopped in front of the Bernards' house. The Rottweilers approached.

"I'm not scared of you," I said, leaning close to the fence.

The dogs began barking and growling and foaming at the mouth. I was so close I could smell their bad breath.

"Come on!"

One of the dogs started digging at the ground, tunneling toward me. It would take him years, and by that time I'd be at home eating a granola bar. I picked up a stick and slid it between the slats of the fence. The dogs yanked and shredded it in seconds.

"That's nothing. Meet my fists and they'll do worse to you."

They growled. I growled back.

"I know where you live."

As I pedaled away on the busted Huffy, the dogs continued to bark and shake the fence. I rode slowly, just to prove I wasn't scared.



Ever since my father quit his job as a psychology professor at the University of Denver, he spent his days sitting in our canvas army tent.

When I got home I threw down the Mexican's Huffy as hard as I could, but that didn't crack the frame or break a spoke; instead, the right pedal chipped out a piece of our cement driveway. I threw open the backyard gate and marched straight into my father's tent. Even though it was designed to be big enough for two people, he took up more than half the space inside.

My dad was wearing a DÜSSELDORF! T-shirt and Wrangler jeans that were rolled up at the bottom. His Bible was open and he was writing something in my old sixth-grade notebook. I flopped down next to him so that my right eye was at the same level as his canvas belt.

"Hey," he said, messing my hair. "Hard day?"

I shrugged.

“I’m using your notebook. Mind?”

I shrugged again.

“I’m going to read you something.” He tapped the Bible.

I shrugged a third time.

“*The LORD kills and brings to life.*” He paused here and scribbled in my notebook before continuing, “*The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.*” He glanced over at me. “It’s interesting. The words. The language. The inherent understanding of democracy. Don’t you think?”

My father had always had hobbies—French cooking, model trains, maps—but he usually drifted away from them after a while. And my father had always read parts of the Bible as a bedtime story, tucking me in, licking his index finger, and leafing through the thin pages until he found a particular passage that more interested him than me. However, studying the Bible night and day, like he was doing now, as if it were a map to Treasure Island, was a hobby that my mom said had been around “too uncomfortably long.”

My father shifted suddenly and the tent trembled with his weight. He stretched his left leg, out past the door flaps, and touched his bare heel to the grass.

“*He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.* I can’t stop thinking about that. That line.” He scratched the side of his nose. “Hannah couldn’t have children. And she watched her husband’s other wife just pop them out, one by one. Imagine. It’s terrible. Feeling as if she didn’t have a purpose. She went to the temple every day and prayed like a crazy woman. Eli said to her, ‘*How long will you go on being drunk?*’ and shooed her away with the promise that God would give her a

child.” My father paused, but the gears were still rolling. “And just think about how Hannah’s story would be viewed today. Think what Judith Plaskow or even”—he chuckled, the exhalation sounding *rat-atat*—“Nancy Chodorow or even those New Body Feminists your mother hung out with in college would say. A woman praying for a child?” He nodded toward the Bible in his lap. “It’s Hannah. Her desolation. The emptiness she must have felt inside. That’s what’s real. Desperation giving birth to something remarkable.”

I ran my fingernail against the canvas. My dad started writing again. I glanced at my old notebook. He had scribbled over the front and back covers and in the margins. He had even written upside down.

Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked for him from the LORD.”

It was weird to imagine that there was some bearded man thousands of years ago who had the same name as me. It was easier to see a connection with myself, Samuel Francis Gerard, to, say, the actor Gil Gerard, who played Buck Rogers.

My father’s pen scratched the paper. The wrinkles on the side of his eyes deepened, and his mouth opened only enough for me to glimpse the pink sides of his tongue.

“Can anyone go to heaven? Even someone evil?”

“Hmm.”

“What about Ronald Reagan? You know. Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan.”

Ronald Reagan’s name rolled off the tongue like the curl on his forehead.

“I’m aware of who our president is.”

“Ronald Reagan.”

My dad looked up. I had made him smile.

“I believe you are referring to how your mother feels about him. But when she says he’s ‘evil,’ she’s just being figurative. The question you should ask is, What is evil? Plenty of people tell you what evil is. Evil is Gorbachev. Evil is Arafat. Evil is Castro.”

“Evel Knievel.”

“There’s nothing in the Bible about what really constitutes evil. Evil in the twenty-first century, eh. But”—he tapped the notebook—“that’s what I’ve been doing the last few weeks. Putting together a guidebook using scripture from the Bible. Getting to the root of what ‘evil’ is.”

“Did you know that in 1975, Evel Knievel once jumped fourteen Greyhound buses?”

Father clicked the point of the ballpoint pen in and out, and in and out. I turned on my side and put my head in his lap. My father took long, deep breaths, exhaling through his nose. After a while he began taking more notes. The sun went behind a cloud and the color inside the tent went from the color of cash to February gray.

I closed my eyes and imagined that I was Evel, dressed in a slick white suit, blue and red arm tassels flapping as I sped along the motorway on my motorcycle. As the ramp got closer and closer, I focused my stare, cranked the accelerator, and gritted my teeth.



I woke up an hour later, head in my dad’s lap, hungry enough to eat an entire Chinese buffet. He was reading. I rolled out of the tent and went inside to make some popcorn. My grandmother was watching *The Jeffersons* and shaking her head every time the canned audience laughed.

“I did laundry too,” she said, nodding toward the television. “It’s not difficult.”

“Do you want popcorn?”

“No thank you,” she said. Then she turned to the television

again. “Look at them. Look at those wretched people. Well, at least you’re a good boy. Can you bring me a glass of warm water?”

I was supposed to *understand* my grandmother and why she was always so angry, but *understanding* her required knowing world history. She hid in her attic during the First World War until soldiers destroyed her house and smashed the heads of her puppies. Then her family got sick and died, and she was orphaned. She made money by nursing crippled soldiers. When Hitler became president, she predicted another war and bought a steamer ticket to America. She married my grandfather and had my aunt and my mom. Then my grandfather got emphysema and died right after my mom was born. In order to support herself and her new family, my grandmother worked sixteen-hour days sewing and tailoring, and when my mom got polio, she took on a night job cleaning offices.

“I only wish,” my grandma said one night as we watched Charles Bronson blow someone’s face away, “that there really were heroes like these people on television.”

When my mom wasn’t home I would ask my grandmother all sorts of questions, just to see how she would answer. For example, if I asked why the Chinese were short, my grandmother would say it was because they sat on mats instead of chairs. The Italians invented welfare so American taxpayers could care for all of their children. Black people and cats had the same attitude problem.

Now, as I filled up a glass with warm water from the kitchen tap for my grandma, I thought about how my mom said the Democrats put fluoride in the tap water so poor people wouldn’t get cavities. My grandma said that poor people should “get off their lazy butts and brush their own teeth.” I held the glass up to the window and studied the water, but all I could see were little bubbles.

The Jeffersons was ending when I returned to the living

room. I handed my grandmother the glass and her fingers briefly touched mine. They felt like rice paper.

“Some people just take and take,” she said, nodding toward the television, where the credits of *The Jeffersons* trickled down the screen. “And others give as much as they can. But I always say that doesn’t balance the world out.” She took a sip of her water. “Instead, it just makes one side heavier than the other.”

She patted the seat next to her. I sat down; she took my hand in hers. She smiled at me and I smiled back and then we watched a commercial where two women in white lab coats dipped tampons in blue liquid.



When my mom got home from her job testing polluted groundwater, I brought my bowl of popcorn out to her vegetable garden. She was wearing a white sweater, and her smooth black hair made a clean stripe down the middle of her back. Next to her was a pile of dandelion corpses.

“We should grow alfalfa,” I suggested.

“What for?”

“To feed horses.”

“The closest horses are at Cherry Creek. I think there are only two of them.”

“If we had alfalfa, then people might buy horses.”

“Is your father here?”

I nodded and she did one of her sigh/laughs. For years, my mom and I had waited on the front porch when my dad came home from the university.

“I’ll get him.”

She waved away my offer and plucked another dandelion that was next to a yellow polka-dotted pumpkin. She had planted so many different squashes over the years that they had become all mixed up and intermarried like the British royal family. She

lifted the pumpkin from the ground and held it up for inspection. It had curly brown scars on the bottom.

“Remember when I took you to the botanical garden? Rows of perfect string beans and cherry tomatoes.”

The botanical garden was probably the most boring place ever.

“When I was sick with polio,” she said, “I spent a lot of time looking out the window. I would watch those wild Florida plants choke and consume one another. They were so beautiful and so merciless.”

She twisted out another weed from the ground.

“Can you get me the hose?”

I set down my bowl of popcorn and went to the side of the house where the hose was coiled around an old hubcap. When my mom talked about her polio, my head got all cloudy. It was hard to imagine her at the age of twelve, the doctors snapping her spine so it'd grow one way or another.

And even though it had been so long ago, she had never fully recovered. When the weather changed or she slept without her special foam pillows, she would spend much of the day popping Tylenol. Other times she begged my father to rub her shoulders and he would grind into her spine the same way he kneaded dough.

One night, my mother tried to show me pictures from back when she had polio and was stuck in the hospital, but I told her I didn't want nightmares. She had sighed, and as much as I hated to let her down, I had had to lie. The truth was, I hardly ever got nightmares. I was just terrified of anything that could prove that, at one time, my mom had been sick and helpless.

I turned on the tap. The water was cold and clear and I drank mouthfuls. Even though I wasn't thirsty, there was nothing better than drinking from the hose. I pulled it around the side of the house. When I came up behind my mom, she was wiping her eyes.

“Here's the hose,” I said.

My mom took the hose and began to spray the dry spots on the ground, her head down, her eyes staring straight through to China.

“He’s writing a book,” I said, after the silence became too much. “He’s taking quotes from the Bible about evil and putting them all together. Maybe it will become a bestseller.”

“This isn’t like all those other books your father has written. You know that, right?”

My mom continued to spray the lettuce, the afternoon light hitting the mist and creating a miniature rainbow. It was beautiful, but my mom hardly noticed the green and yellow and red stripes floating midstream. I thought maybe she needed a hug, but on the other hand, hugging her sometimes made her cry. So I stood there and uncoiled the hose while my mom coated the lettuce in fluoride.

Jonathon had used all his birthday money to order hi-tech weapons from the back of the *Soldier of Fortune* he got at the Dolly Madison. But they would take four to six weeks to arrive, so we came up with another plan to get our bikes back from the Mexicans.

“They go to the tunnels to have sex and take drugs,” Jesse said. “They have to leave their bikes somewhere.”

The tunnels were where the entire drainage system of Denver emptied out into a gulch. Movie tickets, pop cans, newspaper clippings, dandelions, candy wrappers, photographs, cotton-balls, dead mice, dead birds, tennis balls came from the gutters, flowed into the tunnel, pooled at the waterfall, and eventually poured into the gulch.

We rode the Mexicans’ bikes over to the gulch and left them

behind a row of bushes. Then we hid behind one of Geronimo's glass bottle piles. His real name was Henry. But to us he was just the homeless Indian we called Geronimo. He was short and wide and had a round face with eyebrows so thick they shadowed his eyes. I had never thought much about Geronimo until we started looking at pictures of the Old West and learning about Indians in school. Our textbook said that many of the Indians were lucky to become comrades in the building of such a great nation as the United States. The Indians gave us many important things: hemp to make marijuana clothes, corn to make Fritos, and gourds. And although Thanksgiving was a celebration of friendship between Indians and Americans, usually, after eating turkey and stuffing, Jonathon, Jesse, and I would find Geronimo alone in the gulch, drunk and passed out.

Today, Geronimo was leaning against the bulldozer on Tina Turner's Tabletop, scratching his bare shins. He scratched and scratched and scratched, then stopped, then scratched.

"I see my bike," I said, pointing to the waterfall.

"Our bikes must be farther in," Jesse whispered to Jonathon.

"Shhhh. I'm hunting Mexicans," Jonathon said in his best Elmer Fudd imitation.

We slunk across the gulch and into the tunnel. The tunnel was low, and Jonathon, Jesse, and I walked like Igor in Frankenstein. Above us, on the street, we could hear forklifts backing up, people shouting, manholes clanking, and jackhammers jackhammering.

"Go hide it," Jonathon said when we reached my bike.

"I'll go with you."

They both shushed me and Jesse pointed for me to take the bike out. I walked away, happy to get my bike back but uncomfortable with leaving Jesse and Jonathon behind.

It was hard pushing my bike along the mossy bottom of the tunnel because the wheels kept slipping. I listened carefully for

Jonathon and Jesse, waiting for the sound of gunfire, but once they had turned the corner, at the far end of the tunnel, all I heard was the traffic roaring above.

When I emerged into the light, I headed straight up the side of the gulch, toward Tina Turner's Tabletop, pushing my bike in front of me. I didn't want to miss Jonathon and Jesse when they came back out, and I also wanted to sound the alarm if any more Mexicans decided to show up.

When I reached Tina Turner's Tabletop, I found Geronimo in the driver's seat of the bulldozer, chomping on a mouthful of Doritos, the artificial orange powder lining his lips and fingertips.

"Howwww," I said to him, holding out my palm in traditional Indian style.

"White bread," he growled.

This wasn't the response I had expected, although in the past, Geronimo had called me much worse.

"I said 'how' like Indians in the movies. You're supposed to understand."

"White bread, cottage cheese, and a glass of milk."

I sat down several feet away from Geronimo, feeling sulky. He grumbled and turned his back to me, finishing his Doritos in solitude.

It seemed to take hours for Jonathon and Jesse to come out, and when they did my heart sank. They didn't have their bikes, but they both had bloody lips, and Jonathon's left eye was swollen.

I ran over. Jonathon was crying.

"I'm gonna kill them so bad," he stammered.

Jesse grabbed the Mexican's bike, the one he had left with me, and threw it into the waterfall. Jonathon did the same.

"You're gonna go back to your country," he yelled in the direction of the tunnel. "I'll kill you. And your mothers! And your . . . your whole family!"

We all sat down. As soon as Jonathon stopped crying, Jesse started. But it was mad crying, and he frantically wiped away the tears. I wanted to cry too.

“My mom will sue their Mexican asses.”

“My dad knows someone in the FBI.”

I didn't say anything, but I knew that Jonathon's and Jesse's parents wouldn't do anything. They didn't even come to parent-teacher night to pick up report cards.



Jesse had to go home and clean the gutters, so Jonathon and I walked over to Dolly Madison and bought two Deuteronomy Delights. We sat outside on the Dolly Madison bench, in the sun. The sky was a dry blue and I was sure if I looked hard enough, I could see into space. The white tops of the Rocky Mountains, which usually looked like vanilla ice cream cones licked sharp, were browned by Denver's smog. The flags lining the rows of FOR SALE automobiles at Big Todd's Auto flapped in the wind. An empty plastic cup lay in the middle of Yale Avenue, run over and over by different cars, each time the *crunchety crunch* lessening. A man sprayed water against the tinted windows of the Midland Bank, moving the stream back and forth.

“What happened back there?” I asked.

Jonathon grunted.

“Did you fight them?”

“What do you think? Huh?” He nosed his foot around the sidewalk. “God, they're stupid, Samuel. I hate them. All of them. They have crosses around their necks, you know? Little gold-plated crosses. Not even fourteen K.”

“Do you think God made Mexicans?” I asked, hoping the question might make him feel better.

“Doubt it,” Jonathon replied.

“What about orange soda?”

“Probably.”

I could tell he liked me changing the subject.

“Aluminum?”

“Duh.”

“Communists?”

He thought this one over.

“Do you think God made Olivia Newton-John?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jonathon replied, and grabbed his crotch.



When I got home, my dad was digging a hole in the middle of the backyard. His shirt was off and he had a bandana tied around his head. The afternoon was getting hot, but when I sat down, the moist lawn cooled the back of my legs.

Instead of asking him what he was doing, I just sat quietly and watched until he noticed me.

“I’m digging my own grave,” he said finally.

“You didn’t ask Mom for permission?”

He made a “Whatareyougonnado?” face and stabbed the shovel into the ground. There were moons of sweat around his neck and under his arms, and his cheeks were red from the heat.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Is it a swimming pool?”

My father shook his head and took a sip from a can of Coors.

“You want a sip?”

I nodded and my father handed me his beer. It tasted horrible, like grass-water. I swallowed and felt it eating away at my esophagus. I immediately gave the can back.

“Where’ve you been?” he asked.

“At the gulch.”

“What’d you do?”

“Threw rocks.”

A plane was flying overhead, leaving a slug trail. I couldn’t hear the plane because Bill, the basset hound three doors down, was barking, probably at Mr. McElvoney delivering mail.

“Your mom and I set out to live the simple life in the sixties,” he said. “Sometimes I start to believe that simplicity is impossible in the world we live in. Especially in this country, where everything is just ‘go go go.’ It’s nice to hear that you and your friends can still enjoy throwing rocks.”

I smiled with one corner of my mouth. He looked into the sky and, spreading his nostrils wide, inhaled half the stratosphere. Gradually, he closed his eyes and squeezed his eyelids together. Then he opened them slowly, as if he was hoping to see something different.

“Spending hours writing meaningless crap that nobody understands except your colleagues, who don’t really like you anyway. Or reading meaningless dissertations by students who know more about Carl Jung than they know about themselves. The pursuit of meaninglessness.”

Bill stopped barking. I looked into my dad’s face. It was so heavy with disappointment.

“Jesus said you can gain everything in the world and lose your soul. How I want to go back to those days when I believed I could affect people positively, when I still had heaps of hope.” Then he motioned for me to follow him. “Come on. I need your help with something.”

We walked over to the garage and set up a ladder. My father clambered to the top, near the rafters, dug around where we stored all the things we never used but didn’t throw away, and handed me two thick railroad ties. We carried them out of the garage and set them by the hole.

Carefully, he positioned one tie on top of the other, took two pieces of thick rope, and fastened the wood pieces together. Then we slid the cross into the hole. He shoveled dirt around the base and tested its sturdiness by giving the cross a wiggle.

“Let’s hope the tectonic plates don’t shift,” he said, “or we’ll have to do it all over again. Can you go get me another Coors?”

I went inside and brought my father a fresh Coors, and he

drank it as if it was the best thing ever. He set down his beer and hoisted me on his shoulders, and we strung up Christmas lights. Afterward, we sat on the lawn and admired our gigantic cross.

“The symbol of a cross is so simple,” he said. “But it has so much meaning.”

I nodded. He nodded to my nod, licked his teeth, and said, “Before you were born, and I was going to school in Santa Barbara, your mother and I used to camp on the beach. She would wander up into the hills and gather wild plants and herbs, then cook them with vegetables from our small garden. I would gather mussels off the rocks and boil them over a fire. And I remember being on the beach and listening to the waves and the seagulls and your mom saying, ‘You don’t need God when you have nature.’ Even though I loved the beach and the simplicity and the beauty, well, nature, to me, has none of the beauty of God. I told her so.” He smiled like a new student realizing he’s walked into the wrong classroom. “We never worked that one out. Your mom and I. We haven’t talked about it for years. I guess that will change today when she gets home.”

My dad lay down and exhaled. I lay down next to him and looked up at the cross. From the vantage point of an ant, it seemed enormous.



My mom came home around six and sat in our Ford Fiesta for several minutes, staring at the cross.

“You’ve been busy.”

“We made it without any power tools,” I replied. “Like the Romans.”

“Hmm. I see. Samuel, can you go inside and defrost the peas?”

It felt as if my mom and dad were always sending me into the house to do something. I turned my back and marched off. The minute I closed the screen door, they started talking.

I took the peas out of the freezer and set them on the counter. That was when I heard my mother shout something. I crept back to the windows. She was pointing angrily at the cross and saying, “What is this, Mark? I give you space to find yourself. Are you just so unhappy?”

“*My kingdom is not of this world . . .*”

“See the wedding ring on your finger? Your kingdom most certainly *is* here.”

My mom swallowed and studied my father. Then she took his hands in hers. She whispered something. Suddenly my father acted as if my mom’s hands were as hot as fire. He pulled his hands away and put them behind his head. Then he made two half-spins away from her.

“I turn on the television and I see what’s going on. . . . Selling guns to fraudulent governments and turning away while they slaughter their own people. Keeping brutal dictators in power for our own interests. This country is being built on blood. When it could be so good. So beautiful. And I don’t do anything. I sit here and enjoy the fruits of evil. With health insurance and an electric shaver and five different flavors of pie to choose from at the grocery store.”

He was nervous. Cornered.

“How would Jesus handle the negligence here in Denver? Right in our own neighborhood. Look at Henry, for God’s sake! Living in a gulch. Me, you, your mom . . . we live in a bubble. Cleaver Street is a bubble. And for Samuel that’s good. That’s what we wanted until he got older. But for me . . . I can’t sit by and watch anymore.”

“You’re Mark Gerard, not Jesus.”

With his free arm, my dad punched his waist, once, twice, and a third time. Then he closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths, and slowly reopened them.

“Once, I told you how important God was to me. You didn’t

accept what I said. At least not in your heart. You just hoped it would go away. But it didn't. In fact, my feelings, my need to connect to something higher, have grown."

"That's not right, Mark."

"I was . . . I've always been embarrassed of my faith around you."

He let go of the cross, stepped forward, and met her eyes.

"God speaks to me," he said. "Ever since I was sixteen, God has been speaking to me. Even now I hear him. God has been speaking to me and giving me advice. He convinced me to go to college, to marry you, to be a father to Samuel. Everything I've done right is because I've listened to Him. Maybe I have psychosis. Maybe I'm bipolar and see the world in grandiloquent terms. But what if, just what if, God really is speaking to me?"

My mom winced. My dad stepped forward again and, this time, took her hands in his.

"If you love me, then believe in me. Believe that I'm not crazy. Believe that there is a possibility, however small, that God is speaking to me. That soon I will be able to decipher His message and begin to do what I need to do. Understand me. Trust a little. You and Samuel will do fine by yourselves."

My mom wiped her eyes and didn't say anything for a minute. Eventually she pointed to the fresh earth around the cross and said so quietly that I had to read her lips: "You dug up my string beans."



4

The next day, I was on fire.

We played basketball the whole afternoon and I made one free throw after another. Jonathon and Jesse tried to stop me, but it was impossible.

“How’d you get so good?”

“Pure talent.”

“You usually suck at basketball.”

I ignored this last comment and sunk a three-pointer. Jonathon and Jesse were sore from fighting the Mexicans, and ordinarily I would have pitied them like fools, Mr. T style, but I was having too much fun winning.

“You get in trouble?” Jonathon asked Jesse. “Not having your bike and all.”

“Naw. You?”

“My dad hasn’t noticed anything. He was supposed to go on a date with my mom. They got into a big ol’ fight.”

Jonathon’s parents had been divorced for two years, but had recently started dating each other, as if they were teenagers all over again. The only problem was that Jonathon’s mother was also dating a Russian who sold painted spoons in the Albertsons supermarket parking lot.

“He’s miserable again,” Jonathon said. “My mom and dad hate each other more than when they were married. All they do is fight over the fact that she’s got another boyfriend.”

“I wish my mom would start dating again.” Jesse sighed. “Then I could have the house all to myself.” He looked over at me. I was dribbling between my legs. “Can we take a time-out?”

I lifted, shot, and dropped another basket.

“You got something in you, Samuel.”

“I’m gonna take on Alex English next.”

Alex English played for the Nuggets and was the best center in the whole NBA. He drove a BMW and lived in a gated community five blocks away. We had once seen him through the window of T-Rex’s Steak and Grill, making out with a *Playboy* Playmate.

“I want to go home,” Jonathon said.

“One more game,” I said.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“I’ll give you guys a four-point advantage.”

“You’ll probably still win.”

He was right. I was the best.



My dad didn’t join us for dinner. He read and ate a tuna fish sandwich in his tent. In fact, I wasn’t sure he had even stepped foot in the house since last night, when, cured by my mom’s silent treatment, he had taken down the cross, pouting as he crossed the lawn with the lumber over his shoulder.

While the three of us ate linguini, Grandma started complaining about black people.

“And that clear plastic they wear on their heads,” Grandma said. “All the time. Full of grease. ‘You got Jiffy Pop in there?’ I asked one of them. He gave me the finger. His big black fin—”

“We’ve been testing groundwater out at Rocky Flats,” my mom interrupted, “where they make nuclear missiles. You know the water is saturated with pollutants.”

“You’re going to grow a third eye,” I said. “Like the fish out there.”

She aimed her fork in my direction. “I’ll look exactly like I always have. So will everyone I work with.”

“And you’ll grow nine feet tall.”

My grandma was struggling to hold her glass of water. My mom helped her steady her hand and said to me: “Then you’ll really have to listen to me, young man. Nine feet tall. Wouldn’t that be something?”

My grandma drank carefully, but a few droplets of water leaked from the side of her mouth.

“Finally,” my mom said, taking a bite of food, “real work. My work . . .” She checked our eyes. “Let’s just hope that over the next year our evil president doesn’t take the money from our contract and put it into making more ICBM’s.”

Last year a military man from the air force base in Colorado Springs had visited our Social Studies class. After school he had a special “boys only” meeting. We asked him questions for hours and he distributed different sheets of important military information. One sheet spelled out the most important acronyms: NUCINT, Nuclear Intelligence; AWSCOM, Advanced Weapons Support Command; LCPK, Low Cost Precision Kill.

“ICBM,” I sang now. “ICBM. ICBM. Intercontinental ballistic missile. Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan. Intercontinental ballistic missile. Reagan Ronald. Ronald—”

“Children should be seen, not heard,” my grandma said, covering her ears.

My mom waved for me to stop.

“Intercontinental Ronald!”

It was hard to shut my mouth because the words were building up in my cheeks.

“You know what I heard on the radio driving home from work today?” my mom said. “The Russians and the Americans have enough nuclear missiles to blow up the world six times over! It’s amazing, the energy and money we put into destroying one another. Six times over.”

“Cool!”

“It is *not* cool. I can’t believe you’d say such a thing.”

I picked at my food. I could never say anything right. So I whispered: “Intercontinental ballistic missile. Intercontinental ballistic missile. Ronald Reagan. Ronald—”



My mom ordered me to take a bath, which was fine, because the only other option was to sit next to my grandmother and listen to German opera.

I filled up the tub, stripped, and, making sure the window curtains were closed and none of my friends could have the slightest chance of discovering my secret, opened the sink cabinet and took my box of plastic boats from behind the cleaning products. Soon I was completely surrounded by destroyers, battleships, and aircraft carriers.

I was about twenty minutes into a full naval rout of German U-boats by American destroyers when my father walked in, lifted the toilet seat, and peed.

“How’s the bath coming along?”

“Fine.”

“Who’s winning?”

“Us.”

“Who’s ‘us’ fighting?”

“Them.”

“That’s the way it should be,” my father said, nodding his approval. “You know those moccasins we have hanging in the living room? The story behind them kind of goes back to what we were talking about in the tent. About evil and how it’s perceived. Have I ever told you about my grandfather?”

My father’s caterpillar eyebrows bent in concentration. He wiggled his penis, zipped, flushed, rinsed and dried his hands.

“Your great-grandfather was a sculptor and a philosopher. You know, quite a few men in our family have been artists and thinkers. And I guess that’s common in Bohemia, where the word ‘Bohemian’ comes from. Rich in arts. Philosophy. Science. Learn this in Social Studies? Czechoslovakia. That whole part of the Hapsburg Empire. That’s our roots.” My father lowered the toilet seat and sat.

“Grandma says your family is godless.”

“Your grandma’s knowledge of history is very narrow. A few relatives are, were, atheists. Now, Czechoslovakia is supposed to be Communist. Well, Socialist. Not believing in God is the norm in that kind of society.”

“Grandma says that Czechoslovakians are too dumb to be Protestant and too poor to be Catholic, so that’s why they worship manual labor.”

“Do you want to hear about your great-grandfather? About the moccasins?”

“Okay.”

My dad steadied himself into the story. “When your great-grandfather immigrated to America, he joined the army. They gave him a uniform and shipped him out to the Dakotas to serve under General Custer. Every day he had to get up early and scout for Indians. It was miserable work, and his regiment hardly had

any food to eat. But he liked being outdoors. He said in the afternoons he would find a nice quiet place, far from the other troops, and read or jot down his thoughts. He had so many plans here in America. He wanted to start a farm and have a big family and work together with his neighbors to create a real community, like his village back in Bohemia. He would sit by himself, mapping out his dream community, a communal farm, constructing a philosophy where everyone could live equally. His dream was to create a utopia. But a perfect society and the killing of natives don't mix. One afternoon, while your great-grandfather was out by himself, he accidentally bumped into a young Sioux boy who was trapping rabbits." He paused.

"And? What happened?"

"He pinned the boy down and covered his mouth. If he let the boy go, he'd call out to the Sioux warriors who were passing below. They would kill your great-grandfather. Thus no future. No me. No you. No utopia." My father paused, resuming in a quieter tone. "He slit the Indian boy's throat and held him as he bled to death. And according to your great-grandfather, who admitted that his grasp of the Sioux language was lacking, the boy's last words were 'White devil.'"

My father studied me to see if I was still listening. I docked two destroyers against my belly but kept my eyes on him.

"Your great-grandfather told me that as he watched the boy die he was so distraught, so horrified by what he had done, that he left his notebook, his plans for a perfect society, behind and, instead, removed the boy's moccasins. He said that he no longer wanted to create a utopian community. Instead, he spent the rest of his life wearing those moccasins on his own feet. He went around the country telling people about the violence Americans were perpetrating against the Indians." My father pinched the tip of his beard. "If you are aware that violence exists, and you do nothing about it, nothing to stop it, then that's almost as bad as actively participating." He paused, wincing, as if my great-

grandfather's advice were a hunger pain. "A message like your great-grandfather's didn't go over so well in Manifest Destiny-era America. A soldier returning from the front and condemning his own army. It was especially bad in some of the areas that had a history of fighting the Indians. Wyoming. Kansas. He was run out of a few towns. The irony is that he was also called the 'devil' by those people, pioneers who had lost family to the Indians."

My father inspected the bath mat for almost an eon.

"Did you know that one of the top five greatest American battles was the Alamo?" I said, breaking the silence. "One hundred eighty-seven Americans killed more than two thousand Mexicans in eleven days."

My father looked up, stunned. "Did you learn this in school?"

I started to nod proudly, but stopped under the weight of his disappointed stare. My father gazed at the American and German warships that had taken a break in their battle for Samuel Island.

"Well, keep on the good fight," he said, nodding to my boats. *"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."*

As he left, lost in thought, closing the door quietly behind him, I wished I had said something else besides a quote from my Social Studies textbook. I inhaled and slid my butt down along the tub until my chin touched the water. I didn't know what my father wanted me to say when he talked about the Bible and evil. I don't even think *he* knew what he wanted me to say. Saying something to my father, as I had done about the Alamo, in the end, meant nothing, while saying nothing probably would have meant everything.



5

As the morning sun was rising, I heard my father talking. I rubbed my face and threw off the covers. The sun was resting on top of the Salvation Army building. Birds were chirping like in the jungle movies. Outside, my father was kneeling in prayer.

When I was younger, I often fell asleep on my father's chest. He would read and I would wake up and fall back asleep and wake up. Lying there, I felt safer than I had in my whole life. But that was when he was a professor with a wine belly. This morning, stretching under the morning sun, he no longer looked soft. He was more like a boxer or a running back for the Broncos.

I opened the window and the wood against wood screeched.

"How long have you been there?" he asked, turning.

"What are you doing?"

He motioned for me to come near him. He helped me climb

out the window. Then he put his arm around me, bit his bottom lip, and pointed at the orange horizon.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “There’s no human in the world who could replicate such a masterpiece. We can only sit on our little planet and gaze up at it.”

“I heard that every day one baby in the Sahara goes blind from all the sun.”

He sat down and then I sat down. The grass was wet and the water soaked through my pajamas, but the warm August morning sun felt perfect against my face.

“When you were born, you had the umbilical cord wrapped around your neck. Twice. And you didn’t want to come out. The doctors said that your oxygen level was low and if something wasn’t done you could have brain damage. They stuck a suction cup to your head and tried to pull you out, but you were stuck. I prayed for the first time in years. I prayed that my child would come out and live a happy and full life. I even told God that I would do whatever He wanted if He just let you live. The crazy thing was that just after I finished that prayer, your mom pushed. I mean, she was delirious, but she had just enough energy to give that final push. You popped right out. For the longest time I refused to believe that it was because I prayed. I was just so happy to hold you. This little purple thing with big alien eyes.”

The morning was becoming louder with birds and airplanes and cars. It smelled like grass and thin mountain air. Time inched along. A traffic helicopter hovered briefly in the distance, over I-25. Bill the basset hound let out a few early-morning barks.

Suddenly there was a huge explosion. I thought it was an earthquake or a nuclear missile. My dad stood and looked around. I stood too. I was covered in goose bumps.

“What was that?”

“Shhhh,” he said, putting his finger to his lips.

A gray puff formed in the sky. My father took my hand and I followed him down the alley. As we walked we could hear the

screaming bullhorn from the firehouse, then the fire trucks honking their way onto Colorado Boulevard.

Two blocks later we reached a burning house. All the windows were shattered and the heat was making the curtains blow outward until they, too, caught fire.

My father and I sat down on an adjacent lawn while ash snowed everywhere. The firemen coated the house in foamy water.

The firemen began shouting and preparing to enter the house. We watched them break down the front door and head straight into the belly of the blaze.

More and more neighbors were coming out of their houses, standing around in bathrobes and whispering to one another. A few even came over to us and asked if we knew anything.

After several minutes, the firemen brought out the body of the woman who had been inside. I had seen her before. She used to sunbathe on her front lawn and once paid me a whole fifteen bucks to shovel the snow from her sidewalk. She was a short woman with long brown hair, weight-lifter legs, and enormous breasts. Now, under the sheet, there was hardly anything left.

The firemen came, huddled with my father and a few other neighbors and explained what had happened. I inspected at least seventy-three dials on the fire trucks. Later, as we headed back up the alley, my father put his arm around my shoulders. He had an amused expression on his face, as if the fire and the firemen had confirmed some idea in his head.

We stopped by the Bernards'. The Rottweilers were lying close to their house, all five of them keeping one eye on us and one eye on the smoke a few houses away. The explosion had been loud even where we lived. I couldn't imagine what it must have sounded like to them.

"In the Old Testament," my dad said, looking over at the dogs, "there were long periods where the prophets would be waiting

for a sign from God. They had one ear to heaven. Their crops, their lives, depended on how God felt.”

The O’Shanys were sitting out on their porch, sipping coffee. They waved, and my father and I waved back. They asked about the explosion, and my father summarized what had happened. Then, as we started walking home again, he said, “This morning we awoke to God’s sunrise. But our existence is so fragile. The pilot light in that woman’s water heater gets blown out. The basement fills with gas—”

“That wouldn’t really happen to us?”

“We live with an angry God.”

“What is He angry about?”

My dad leaned his head back, closed his eyes, but didn’t answer.

“I don’t understand,” I insisted. “Why would God put out a pilot light?”

“He’s sending us all a message, Samuel.”



When we got home, my mom was waiting for me. She hardly let my father finish his explanation of the morning’s events before she said to me: “Go get dressed. I’ve only got this day free, and I’m checking things off my list. First is school clothes.”

“Nooooo.”

“We’re going to JCPenney.”

“No. Please. No.”

“Get dressed!”

I skulked away, taking my sweet time to get to my room. I tried to change out of my pajamas, but they wouldn’t come off. The fire had welded them to my skin. I would have to wear them forever and I relayed this to my mom.

“I don’t have all day, Samuel!”

When I came back out I could tell she and my father had argued again. She was nervous and distracted. He was in his tent.

In the Fiesta, I told my mother what I had seen at the fire, playing up how badly it had scared me. I suggested that I should probably stay in bed for the rest of the day and maybe miss the first few weeks of school, but she only turned up National Public Radio, pretending to be interested in a story about endangered flamingos. I didn't say how I knew that she was driving the long way to the mall so we wouldn't pass the burned house.

Unfortunately, my mom found a parking spot right in front of the mall, so even walking ten feet behind her bought me only one or two minutes.

I hated JCPenney, with all the old women in polyester pants with zippers in the back and name brands that no one had heard of endorsed by actors no one knew. The only good thing about JCPenney was a wooden escalator whose slick railing you could slide down twice as fast as on a banister without burning your butt. But when we went, every year, my mom always bought me the most boring, tasteless clothes that looked exactly like the clothes from the year before. Occasionally, she would sew on an Izod alligator or a Le Tigre tiger, but somehow it never looked right. The kids at school called me Izod Dorkwad.

"You're paying for the brand," my mom said once we had arrived and she had gone straight to the clearance racks.

"I know. That's the point."

"The point is it's thievery."

"That's not a point."

"In my book it is."

"You have a book?"

"I'm not going to continue this conversation, Samuel Francis Gerard."

After my mom selected the usual creased slacks, flannel shirts, and colored socks, turning me into a business casual lumberjack, she tugged me over to the register, frowning and shaking her head.

"I don't get how you guys live with yourselves," my mom

lectured the salesclerk. “I mean, not you specifically, because you’re just a clerk and make what? Two or three dollars an hour? I really mean those guys at the top. They rip off the little old Nicaraguans on one end and the cost-conscious consumer on the other. I’m just trying to buy some school clothes for my son and it’s liable to put me on the welfare rolls.”

And a few minutes later: “Look at that total. That’s a mortgage in itself.”

My mom loaded me with bags of clothes that had been fashionable during the pioneer days. As we walked toward our car, everyone in the world was laughing behind my back, even the security guard, who winked as we passed through the antitheft detectors.



Since I couldn’t jet pack or teleport myself away from my mom and my JCPenney clothes, I settled for taking my bike. But even then, first I had to help dry thirteen dishes, take my grandmother’s sewing kit down from a top shelf, sweep the porch, straighten my desk, and then, then, “Oh, one more thing, Samuel: the garbage,” before I was granted permission to launch. When I peeled away, heading straight toward Jesse’s house, I was going so fast that by the time I turned onto Iliff, the asphalt under my wheels instantly melted into oil.

I dropped my bike on Jesse’s front lawn and strolled inside. Jesse’s mom was asleep on the couch, a torn carton of cigarettes and an empty jug of wine on the end table and Peter Berg arguing about Israel on the radio. Jesse’s mom had been drinking heavily, ever since last year when her now ex-husband, Jesse’s father, began an affair with pageant winner Miss La Plata County.

Jesse and Jonathon were playing Frogger and didn’t even notice as I jumped, stair-to-stair, into the basement.

“I read that NASA uses Ataris to launch rockets,” Jesse was saying.

"They don't use Ataris to launch rockets," Jonathon said.

"I read it."

"You don't know how to read."

I said hello and sunk into an eight-ball beanbag.

"I read about NASA using Ataris in the newspaper."

"They don't tell you that stuff in the newspaper. They talk about terrorists and the Broncos. Besides, haven't you ever seen the big pictures of NASA? They have rooms full of big computers. They don't have Ataris."

"He's right," I said.

"Shut up. How do you think they steer the space shuttle into space?"

"Not with a joystick."

Jesse's mom stocked a mini-fridge with Pepsis. I took one out and opened it. I could drink three in one sitting.

"Stupid frog!"

Jesse threw his joystick onto the carpet. He always lost at Frogger. I picked up the joystick and Jonathon flipped Restart.

"They use an Atari to steer the space shuttle too," Jesse said, opening his own Pepsi.

"Give it up," Jonathon said.

"Everyone knows they use Ataris on the space shuttle. It's a national secret."

Jonathon hit Pause. "You're stupid. They don't use Ataris on the NASA launch pad, in the space shuttle, or anywhere except in your imagination."

"You want to fight over it?" Jesse asked. "Just like you fought those Mexicans."

Jonathon stood up, and then Jesse did.

"I couldn't see anything. I didn't know there were three of them on you."

"Sure you couldn't. You were scared."

Jonathon pushed Jesse. Jesse pushed Jonathon.

"I'll never get your back," Jesse said. "Ever."

“You can’t fight anyway.”

“At least I try.”

Jonathon threw the first punch. Jesse threw Jonathon into the wall. Jonathon hurled the Atari at Jesse. Then they started grabbing everything they could—paperweights, forks, the vacuum cleaner, the toilet plunger. When there was nothing left to throw, they grabbed each other like wrestlers. Jonathon pinned Jesse and started choking him. That was when I pulled them apart.

“Stupid frogs!” Jonathon snapped, shaking loose. “Stupid Atari. Stupid NASA. Stupid Mexicans.”

As he paced around, Jesse stood up and watched him warily. I ordered them to shake hands. Instead they hugged.



My dad spent the day and the evening praying in front of the burned house. Later, as we were watching the ten o’clock news, the back gate opened. Clutching his Bible, my father went straight into his tent and zipped the flaps. My mother was about to cry, but didn’t want to do it in front of Grandma, so she excused herself. She walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Grandma changed the channel to Johnny Carson, who had a boa constrictor around his neck. She laughed and laughed and laughed.

“Them Papists,” she said, wiping her eyes.

Around midnight I heard my mom crying. This kind of crying, the crying that sounded as if it were pounding down the walls, was the kind that was more pain than anything else.

I tossed and turned in my bed, shoving pencil erasers in my ears and taking them out. It was hopeless, frustrating, like seeing a kitten being tortured by a circle of older, tougher kids.

Twice in my life I had heard this kind of crying from my mom. The first time was when we were returning home from the grocery store and our trunk was filled with bags of food. We

saw what looked like a Navajo family sitting on a median on Colorado Boulevard. The mother of the family had placed her little daughter out nearest the cars. The girl was propped up with metal crutches that clasped to her skinny biceps.

\$ FOR DR., their cardboard sign read. And my mom had pulled over and dug frantically in her purse for change, but she had used her last nickel for the gumball machine, for me. Although they barely spoke English, my mom leaned out the window and apologized to the family, giving a list of excuses and promising to come back, until a car behind us honked. And then another. When she returned later in the day, they were gone.

The second time my mother had cried like this was when my father first set up his tent.

“How long is this going to last?” my mom had asked. “Your job. Your responsibilities. Mark? Your family? You can’t just throw everything up in the air and hide in a tent.”

And my father had just pounded in the tent stakes, the right corner, the left, and grunted simple answers. My mom had collapsed right there on our back lawn and cried, until my father silently picked her up and carried her to bed.



Around midnight, I climbed out my window and sat next to my father's tent. I could hear him snoring. After a while I unzipped the flaps and peered in. He was lying on his side, fully dressed, his toes twitching in his sandals. His Bible was under his arm, but I pulled it out as smoothly as a jewel thief.

I tiptoed across the alley, found a quiet place under our neighbors', the Wallacks,' elm, and using the matches that my mother kept under the fireplace, I lit Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus . . . The thin pages vaporized into a black ring, barely giving up a fight. But it was the sheer number of pages that made the task difficult. It took me almost an hour to burn the entire Bible.

I was hunched over as I did this. Hunched so that my back was to the sky. I was sure that I would feel the hand of God smacking me on the back of my head. But during those perfectly peaceful two hours nothing happened. Nothing. The only sensations I

experienced were the warmth of the fire, the wonderful smell of burning paper, and the hope that my dad would give up his “hobby” and come back home for good.



The next day I slept until one. I would have slept longer, but my grandma kept barging in and complaining that Jesse wouldn't stop calling.

“You have to get over to Washington Park,” Jesse said when I called him back.

“Why?”

“Our neighbor saw your dad. By the lake. He's gone totally nutso.”

I hung up, dressed, slurped down a glass of orange juice, and rode as fast as I could over to Washington Park. It seemed as if I hit every red light, and every street that had once been downhill was now suddenly uphill.

When I finally reached the park I rode around the lake twice, eventually finding my dad on the bandstand, dressed in army clothes but not wearing any shoes. He looked terrible, his eyes dazed, a white crust lining his lips, his hair flat in the back and messy in the front.

“At first God came to me in a powerful explosion,” my dad was shouting from his podium. “It was to wake me up from my slumber. To open my eyes to the world.”

People in the park walked by, but no one made eye contact. Once they were a good distance away, however, they started to whisper. A bearded man on a three-wheeled bicycle told my dad to put “a sock in it.”

“Last night God took my Bible. At first I was confused and asked why He had forsaken me. Then I realized that He did not want me to speak from scripture, but from the heart. And this is what I want to say. . . .”

A group of white boys, T-shirts hugging their bodies, sleeves cut off so that their tattoos were exposed, passed by.

“Stick it up your ass!” one of them yelled.

“Satan rules!” yelled another.

“We as citizens of this great country have allowed our eyes to be blinded to the rest of the world. Here, in a day where all we have to do is turn on the television to see suffering in Africa, war in the Middle East, and brutality in Southeast Asia, we still choose to do little or nothing about it. We, a proud Christian nation, shrug at the peasants being slaughtered in El Salvador with American-made guns. We say, ‘There is nothing we can do.’ How can we carry the words of Jesus in our hearts yet turn away those who ask us for help? How can we make weapons that we know will bring harm to others? Why can we not set an example for the world?”

The boys were all singing: “Duh Duh, shout! Duh Duh, shout! Shout at the devil!”

“I am here to speak the Gospel. My interpretation. The Gospel according to Mark Gerard. I am for peace. I plan to go forth into the world, naked, vulnerable, and human, just as Jesus came to us.”

One of the boys, wearing a Judas Priest T-shirt, picked up a chunk of cement, wound up, and threw it as hard as he could. It hit my dad right in the forehead, leaving a long red gash. They laughed and started pelting my father with more rocks. I couldn’t bear it anymore. I rushed over and screamed for them to stop. And they did. For a brief second. Before all three turned and put me in a neck hold. The boy in the Judas Priest shirt grabbed me by the legs and began pulling me around.

I screamed for my dad. I screamed and screamed and suddenly the boys let go. I covered my eyes and heard what sounded like punches. A few seconds later, my father was lying on top of me.

And as I lay there, my face buried in my father's neck, I heard the thud of their boots against his body. People in the park began yelling; there were sirens, and slowly the kicking stopped. The boys cursed and spit on my father. As they went away, my father prayed: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*"

After a few minutes, a group of people descended upon us. They asked over and over if we were all right. A policeman went to his car and got a first-aid kit. Blood was running from my father's nose, his right eye was swelling shut, and his lip was turning purple. Someone gave him an ice pack.

"Go home," my father said to me when the policeman was out of earshot.

"Aren't you coming too?"

"God is warning me. I must get moving."

"Dad?"

"Go home and pray for me. Today, God was saying I must do this alone."

He kissed my forehead. "Pray for me. Pray real hard. Pray God will let me come back so we can be a family again."

"I don't want to!"

"Go!"

"No."

He gave me a soft push.

"If you don't leave . . ."

I refused to hear the end of the sentence. "No. No. No."

I walked backward, away from him, almost tripping over a tree's roots. I grabbed my bike and rode across the grass.

"No," I repeated, when the park was no longer in sight.



My mom made me repeat what had happened at Washington Park. And each time, at the end, she shook her head in disbelief, telling me to start over again. Then, when she couldn't hear the

story anymore, she told me to take a bath and spent the next several hours calling friends and hospitals. But I knew, no matter whom she called, she would never find my dad.

I unleashed my American and German destroyers and sank under the water, submerging myself in the stillness of the tub, alone with my thoughts, leaving the boys' abuse floating alongside my plastic battleships.

What my father had done at Washington Park wasn't like opening a jar or screwing a loose bolt, nor was it like Jan Pieter's father, who lived only blocks away, kicking a soccer ball into infinity. It wasn't like Richard Berrit's father sawing logs in competitions or Les Lowenstein's father hang-gliding over Red Rocks or Harris Bolden's father swimming once a year in Lake Dillon, under the ice, wearing nothing but a tiny Speedo. What my father had done today, by laying on top of me, had been equal in worth to Erik Estrada's pulling a woman from a burning gas tanker in *CHIPS* or William Shatner's risking his and the *Star Trek* crew's lives by using the *Starship Enterprise* to block a powerful death ray. He had stuck to his beliefs. He had revealed his inner strength, the same kind of strength that separated Superman, Aquaman, Batman, and Green Lantern from the rest of us.



My mom ordered a pizza for my grandma and me and spent the rest of the day in her room. My grandma tucked me into bed and hummed a German song until I pretended to fall asleep.

Around midnight I heard my mother crying. I got out of bed, padded across the cold floorboards, and slipped into her room. There were only shadows, dark and darker areas where the light from the street lamp cast a wide stripe across the floor. My mother was huddled under a mass of sheets and blankets, the curves of her body distorted so that, at first, I thought she was upside down.

“Mom?” I whispered.

I shook her lightly and she dropped a photo. I picked it up. In the photo, she held up the hem of her wedding dress as white rice sprinkled all around, smiling as if caught in a rainstorm on a hot day.

I nudged my mother and she moved to the right side of the bed. I climbed under the covers and joined her in her pocket of warmth.

“I’m just looking for answers. But these pictures, they don’t offer anything substantial. They just get me all emotional.”

I handed her a tissue.

“Your grandmother cleaned houses, sewed people’s clothes seventeen, eighteen hours a day. Barely covered my surgeries and medication. And when I needed braces, she took on another job and another and another. What have I done?”

“You help me with my homework.”

My mom blew her nose and set the tissue on the nightstand.

“On my thirteenth birthday, your grandmother took me to go see the great Reverend Fred Roberts. It cost fifteen dollars a ticket back then. Three days’ wages for her.”

She hesitated.

“And when we went inside, the men at the doors saw the braces on my legs and escorted me to the front row. Reverend Roberts gave a sermon and then waded through the crowd, healing people. When he came to us, he asked my mother to support me while he performed a miracle. His two assistants raised my braces into the air and broke them apart for the whole crowd to see. Reverend Roberts put his hand on my head and prayed. That voice. Like a bullhorn right in my face. Praying so that even the audience in the balcony could hear. Praying that God would give me physical strength.”

I offered her another tissue and she wiped her eyes. During movies my mom would cry, especially if someone died at the end.

“I was so young,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do. I prayed with Reverend Roberts. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed in my life. And as we finished praying, the men who had taken off my braces lifted me to my feet and Reverend Roberts announced that I had been healed.” She shook her head. “But I wasn’t. As everyone cheered or prayed and the reverend walked on to the next sick child, I yelled for him to come back. I begged him not to leave, but his two assistants pushed me back. There was praying and screaming and . . . your grandma took me straight outside. She didn’t say a word. Her face was completely blank. She never mentioned Reverend Roberts or how she managed to buy a new pair of braces for me. They just appeared two days later.”

I gave my mom the wedding photo and she held it under a band of light from the street lamp.

“The night before last, your father came into my room and asked me to pray. He wanted me to pray for us. For our happiness. I prayed, Samuel. I really did. I prayed as hard as I did that day with Reverend Roberts.”