

Preface: This story reveals the meaning of life in a slice-of-life fictional story format. If you already know why we're here, or if this format doesn't appeal to you, then just hit the back button on your browser and you'll be sent back to the web site. This is also a work-in-progress that will be presented chapter by chapter until it's finished.

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Thank God For Hell

by John Rockwell

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Chapter 1: My Favorite Child

Kathy tapped her foot faster and faster, hoping her two-year old would catch the beat and go to the bathroom quicker. They were already an hour late and nowhere near ready to go.

Cody pointed to his nose. "This my nose?"

"Yes, that's your nose."

He gave it a cross-eyed look. "Take it off."

She smiled. He was a stinker alright. "I'll do better than that. I'll give you some jelly beans if you hurry up."

He jumped off the seat. "All done."

"Sure, now you are. Let's go find your brother." She took his hand to keep him with her.

"Candy?" he asked.

"In a minute."

"Candy?"

"In a minute."

"Candy?"

"Candy," she said, trying to break the cycle.

"Okay."

Ricky stopped working on his puzzle long enough to give them a drool-dripping grin when they came into the bedroom. He always looked like a puppy waiting to get patted on the head. He and Cody were twins, but definitely not equals. One had gotten all the jumping genes while the other got all of the wet ones.

She let go of Cody long enough to get Ricky dressed, then looked back to see what kind of trouble he'd gotten into this time. He smiled down at her from the top of the dresser.

"And just how do you think you're going to get down from there?" she asked.

He thought about it for a minute. "Jump. Fall down. Hurt head."

"Oh no you don't" she said, grabbing him. She didn't let go again until he was all dressed. By then Ricky looked like he'd taken a shower with his clothes on. 'That boy doesn't need clothes,' she thought, 'he needs a wet suit.' She looked at the two of them and started to shake her head, then stopped. She didn't have too many shakes left.

"Candy?" Cody said again.

"Yes, candy." She went to the jar and got some. Ricky said please before she handed him his so she tried to get Cody to say it too. "What do you say?" she asked, holding it just out of reach.

He didn't think he had to say anything, and didn't.

"Can you say please?"

He kept his lips locked shut.

"Come on now, say pleeeassee."

Still nothing.

"Okay, can you say stubborn?"

"Please."

She rolled her eyes and gave him the candy. It was going to be that kind of day. And that kind of trip too.

She didn't mind driving four hundred miles in a car that had been towed so often she could hook up the two bars herself. Or going down long, deserted stretches of road in the middle of the night. She didn't even mind squeezing in with a couple of two-year olds who thought they could drive too and would drive her crazy trying to prove it. She was willing to do all that so the kids could see their grandparents during the holidays.

What really bothered her was having to do it alone. Tim only had two days off for Christmas this year and had just taken them. That left the annual trip to her parents her responsibility. She didn't think about it very long though. No thought ever lasted very long with Cody around.

Since traveling cases for pets didn't come in his size she used the next best thing, a strategically located car seat, to lock him in place. It was

in the right rear seat so she could keep him in sight and out of the way. Ricky got the seat behind her so she wouldn't have to see what four hundred miles of slobber looked like.

Once they were all battened down she got in front and turned the key, hoping the engine would crank over. It did.

"Mommy?"

"What Ricky?"

"Go potty."

"Uhhaaahh! Why didn't you say something before we got in the car?" If a grin could say I'm sorry, his did. She sighed, got out, undid the two of them, took him to the bathroom, and strapped them back in again. "Alright, can we go now?"

"Okay," Cody said.

"Thank you." The car started again and they were off. She wasn't going to stop for anything now. Every time one of them started to cry she reached for the crackers on the seat beside her. When they got tired of those she began handing out candy corn. When even that wouldn't do she turned on the radio to drown them out. They finally settled down and went to sleep, right before she had to stop for gas. The stop woke them up of course, and started the cycle all over again.

'The science fiction writers have got it all wrong,' she thought, pulling out of the gas station and turning the radio back up. 'Robot soldiers aren't going to be massive machines that crush everything in sight. They're going to be little machines that whine, cry, and grump hour after hour like two-year olds. They'll be too cute to kill and too loud to ignore.'

She could ignore these two for awhile though, at least until the darkness and rhythm of the road could put them back to sleep. After it did, she went back to worrying about how tired she was going to be when they finally got there.

She got in a good hour of worrying before a warm breeze brushed up against the back of her neck. That wasn't a good place for a breeze to come from, not when the air conditioner was running and the windows were up. She turned around and saw Cody staring out of his open window.

"Cody, close the window. Now."

"Bunny go bye-bye," he said, giving her an innocent look.

She gave him an angry one back. "Did you throw Ricky's bunny out the window?" She reached behind her seat and felt around for it. Her fingers couldn't find any bunny fur. "Did you?" she said louder, twisting sideways to look for it.

"Cow say moooo..." he said.

"Don't change the subject." She glanced ahead to make sure she was still on the road and found out she was, along with the cow. It was right in front of them. There was just enough time to yell 'What the -' before they crashed into it. The impact threw it up onto the hood and into the windshield, sending tiny specks of glass into the front seat. She couldn't see where she was going until it rolled off, and then she wished she still couldn't see. They were going over the edge of a bridge. The minute they hit the river below she began thinking in short sentences. 'Get the kids out. Get the kids out. Get the kids out.'

It wasn't easy with water coming in through the doors, the floor, and the windshield. By the time she got her seat belt off it was up to her waist and getting deeper fast. Cody's screams said it scared him too.

She reached back and undid his belt, then forced the lap pad of his carseat up over his head. As soon as he was loose he scooted back against the rear window which was still dry since the car was sinking front-end first.

"No!" she barked. "Come here!"

He edged forward a little, just enough to put him within reach. She grabbed him, slid her arm up under his shirt, and held him by the back of the

neck. She thought she was moving fast, but the water was already up to her shoulders.

Ricky had been watching her the whole time, quietly waiting his turn. She reached back with her free hand and pushed aside the soggy clothes, books, and toys that were in the way, then tried to grab the strap on his carseat. It only took one try to figure out that that wasn't going to work. She took a deep breath and went underwater, switching to a better position as she did. This time she found the strap. One of his blankets was wrapped around it and she couldn't get it free. She came up for another breath and went back down to try again. And failed again. The next time she came up she had to tilt her head back to get some air. Cody was still crying, which was a good sign. If he could cry he could breathe. She went down and tried to get the belt off again. It had always been a hard buckle to work with and it wasn't any easier with the cold water numbing her fingers. No matter how hard she tried or which way she turned, she just couldn't get a good enough grip to press the latch down. She squeezed between the bucket seats to get her head above water for another breath.

If she didn't leave soon they were all going to drown and she knew it. Slamming her fist against the roof out of frustration, she went under again and fought to get the buckle open. It still wouldn't budge. She was inches away from Ricky's face when she came back up.

"Ricky, I'm sorry," she said, tears mixing with the water running down her cheeks. She couldn't get close enough to kiss him so she touched her fingers to her lips and pressed them against his. "Mommy loves you." The corner of his mouth trembled, but he didn't cry. "I'm sorry," she whispered again. Then she took a deep breath, pushed her door open, and swam out, pulling Cody with her.

Chapter 2: Cleaning Up

"Ricky go bye-bye?" Cody asked, shivering in the cool night air.

Kathy held him tight as she watched the river. "Yes, Ricky went bye-bye."

They sat there for a long time, saying nothing.

After awhile a shout from the bridge cut through the silence. She heard the words but they didn't mean anything. It was like a foghorn two minutes too late. A spotlight followed the voice, catching them in its glare for a second before sweeping up and down the river to find their car. There was no trace left of it now though. After a few minutes the policeman behind the light gave up and focused it back on them, pinning them in its circle.

"Are you alright?" he called down again.

This time Kathy could make out what the words meant but she still didn't say anything. She didn't know the answer. One son lived, one son died - was the cup half full or half empty?

A couple of minutes later she heard him making his way through the bushes that lined the riverbank towards them. As soon as he pushed his way through the final clump he unfolded the blankets he'd brought with him and wrapped them in them. "How many people were in the car?"

"Cow," Cody said.

"Yeah," he said, forcing a smile for Cody's sake. "I saw it up on the road there. It was a big joker, wasn't it?"

"It hurt Ricky."

"How many?" he asked again.

"Three," Kathy said lifelessly, making it clear the third one didn't make it out.

"Are you strong enough to help me get this little guy back up to the road? We need to take him to a hospital to make sure he's okay."

She nodded and slowly stood up, keeping Cody in her arms. She held him all the way to the hospital and didn't let go there either. He fell asleep

in her arms that night and was still in them when Tim pulled back the privacy curtain around her bed the next morning. He sat down on the edge of the bed and gently ran a finger across her cheek, trying to comfort her. "It'll be okay," he whispered, not knowing what else to say. It was a lie.

She opened her eyes, looked at him, and turned away. "Have they found him yet?"

"No." He paused, not sure how much she could take. "The divers are working their way upriver. They said it could take a day or two."

They watched Cody sleep for awhile, letting him distract them. He look so peaceful, lying there curled up beside her. When he woke up Kathy forced herself to speak.

"Want something to eat little man?" she asked, brushing the sand out of the corners of his eyes.

"Yes. Candy?"

"No, you've got to eat something good for breakfast."

"Not hungry."

"I'll go see what I can get," Time said, thankful for the chance to do something. As long as he was moving he was okay. By the time he returned from the cafeteria he had a whole list of things he could do to keep himself busy - rent a car, buy a clean change of clothes for Cody and Kathy, find a hotel room, pick up some groceries, call the relatives. At the bottom of the list, way down where he didn't have to pay too much attention to it, was the chore of waiting for the police to tell him they'd pulled Ricky's body out of the river.

That chore would have stayed almost out of sight if the hospital's resident minister hadn't dropped by while they were eating. By giving Kathy and Cody some clothes he'd collected and arranging for a room they could stay in free of charge at one of the local motels, he had cut the list in half and taken away a full morning's worth of distractions. Tim didn't know whether to shake his hand or his neck. A little while later, after they'd picked up

a car and some groceries, there was nothing left to do that didn't remind him of Ricky.

"Do you want me to call Jason and let him know what's going on?" he asked, staring at one of the generic paintings on the wall in their motel room.

Kathy watched Cody watching cartoons for awhile before answering. "No. Let's wait until we get home."

There was a long silence between them while Tim tried to think of what to do or say next. "Beep-beep-," the roadrunner said, giving him no ideas. "Beep-beep." Finally he started thumbing through the yellow pages.

"What are you looking for?"

"A funeral home. We're going to have to make some kind of travel arrangements." He avoided saying Ricky's name so Cody wouldn't hear it and start asking questions he didn't want to answer.

Kathy just nodded and went back to watching Cody watch TV.

They spent most of the day that way, treading water. Every half hour or so Tim would think of something to do, do it, and then go back to waiting. The police called several times that day to reassure them that they were still looking, and then called once more to tell them they'd start looking again tomorrow as soon as the sun came up. After the last call all they could do was eat supper, watch TV, and go to bed. Neither one wanted to talk about the accident and nothing else mattered. They could keep themselves from talking about it but they couldn't keep themselves from thinking about it. Later that night Tim fell asleep with Kathy's tears running down her cheek onto his arms.

The call they were waiting for came the next day right before lunch. The divers had found the car about two miles downriver with Ricky still strapped in his carseat. They had pulled him out and taken him to the funeral home. After the policeman hung up Tim repeated what he'd said.

"Do we need to go to the funeral home too?" Kathy asked.

"No, everything's being taken care of. They're going to fly him home ahead of us. We won't need to do anything else until we get back. We can leave now."

They didn't have anything to pack so it didn't take long to get going. The trip home was quiet but not peaceful. The longer they kept themselves from talking about the accident, the greater the tension grew. The need to talk would only get worse too, and they both knew it. Something had to be said. They couldn't let breaking the news to Jason be the first time they talked about it. Who knew what they'd say in front of him if they did?

As soon as Cody was down for the night she cornered Tim in the kitchen and brought it up. "We need to talk about this."

"I know. I just don't know what to say."

"Say how you feel."

"Say how I feel," he repeated, wondering at how easy that sounded. She didn't understand - they didn't make words strong enough to do that. He picked up Ricky's high-chair and carried it out to the backyard, setting it down on the grass so Cody wouldn't hear anything. Then he went to the garage and came back an ax. Kathy watched without saying anything as he swung the ax over his head and brought it down as hard as he could, driving the blade deep into the back of the chair. His next swing split the back all the way down to the seat. Flipping the blade over, he smashed the butt end down on the tray and knocked it off. He didn't notice Cody peeking at him through the curtains as he took another swing and broke the seat in half. Kicking the chair over onto its side, he swung the ax faster and faster, chopping it into little pieces. The smaller the pieces got the higher they flew when he hit them. Finally, when there was nothing left that was big enough to hit, he threw the ax into the woods behind him. "You want to know how I feel?" he said, suddenly finding the right words. "I feel like grabbing God by the fucking neck and holding him underwater until he drowns. I can't do that

though, can I? I can't do a damn thing." He stared at the ground, breathing heavily. "That's how I feel. And it doesn't make any difference."

"Are you mad at me too?"

"For what? Saving Cody?"

"No - for not saving Ricky."

"There was nothing you could do. It's a miracle you got Cody and yourself out alive."

"I should have saved them both."

"You couldn't."

"You would have."

He looked up at her. "You don't know that."

"I know you feel it."

"You don't know that either."

"Yes I do. You're not as good at hiding it as you think you are."

She was right. He couldn't stop seeing the look on Ricky's face as she swam away, leaving him alone in the dark with the water creeping up his chin. He could almost hear his cries for 'mommy'. They would have been soft; they always were. Then panic must have set in when he couldn't get his lips above the water. He couldn't have known what was happening. All he'd know was that he was scared and his mommy had left him there.

"Okay, so sometimes I think it might have been better if I was in the car. Maybe I even think I could have saved him. So what? Thinking it doesn't mean I could do it."

"No, it just means you think maybe it could've been done and I didn't do it. Well let me tell you something. You're wrong. You couldn't have saved him either."

"Maybe not. But - "

"Forget 'maybe not'. You couldn't have. Period."

"You can say 'period' all you want but I'm still going to think 'maybe'. You wanted to know how I feel and now you do."

"Then you should feel like an idiot too. No one could have saved him."

"No - you couldn't save him. I never got the chance to try, now did I?"

He was lucky she didn't have the ax in her hands right then. "Go to hell," she said, spinning around and stomping off, leaving them both the worse for their honesty. There was so much anger and so little to do with it.

A bad night's sleep didn't make it go away either. The next morning they didn't say anything to each other except when taking care of Cody forced them to, and even then they only spoke in one word sentences. The silence said all they wanted to say. When it came time to pick Jason up at the airport they would have gladly ridden in separate cars but they were one car short. (Thanks to Kathy, Tim thought.) Pushed together by circumstances, they finally agreed on one thing. They agreed not to yell at each other in front of the kids. It was going to be hard enough for Cody and Jason to deal with Ricky's death as it was. They didn't need to deal with their parents' problems too.

Jason got off the plane looking like he didn't know what to expect next.

"I see you got one of the big planes," Tim said, trying to head off another awkward silence. "Must have been a good flight."

Jason didn't know what to say so he let the expression on his face speak for him. It said 'What the hell are you talking about?'

"The airlines take better care of the big ones."

"How do you figure that?"

"It's simple. If money's tight a company's going to spend it on the most expensive thing it owns. It'll lose a lot more money if one of the big ones crash than it will if one of the little ones do."

The idea was so ridiculous it made Jason smile. "You worry too much."

"Maybe. Sometimes I catch myself checking the floor for soft spots when I walk down the aisles."

"You really worry too much."

"Yeah, they've got programs for people like me. A couple of weeks ago I read about one that was supposed to get rid of the fear of flying. The guy who wrote it said they had him keep repeating 'This plane is floating on an ocean of air,' over and over again. It was supposed to relax him. It damn sure didn't relax me. Planes can't tread water when their engines conk out."

They talked about Tim and his irrational fears all the way to the car. Jason had a fear of his own but didn't realize it until Tim got in the driver's seat - he was afraid his mom might want to drive. As fast as the tension went away she brought it right back. "Do you want to talk about the accident?" she asked, twisting around in her seat so she'd be facing him.

"No."

"Are you sure? We left Cody at the sitter's so we could talk without him interrupting us."

"I'm sure."

"Come on, you must want to know something."

"Yeah, I want to know why I had to come back early."

That wasn't the question she expected. "We thought you'd want to go to the funeral."

"Why?"

"To say goodbye. It might help you deal with your feelings."

"There's no one to say goodbye to mom. Ricky's dead. That's it. There's no one there to say goodbye to."

"You don't believe that."

"Yes I do. Can we stop talking about it now?"

"No. You're obviously upset. I want to know what you're thinking."

Jason glared at her. "I'm thinking I could be out riding my moped right now instead of going to some stupid funeral I wouldn't have to go to if you knew how to drive right."

She glared back at him. "Is that all you care about, riding your stupid moped?"

He almost said no, he liked the extra room in back now that one of the carseats was gone, but he was smarter than that. He knew it would earn him a screaming lecture. "No mom, I care about Ricky too. There's just nothing I can do about it."

That was enough to calm her down a little bit. "You could tell us how you feel about it. That might make you feel better."

Tim's hands tightened around the steering wheel but he kept quiet.

"Talking won't change anything," Jason said, staring out the car window. "I'll get over it."

"You're sure you don't want to talk?" she asked, even though the answer was obvious.

"I'm sure."

"Okay, we won't force you to then. If you change your mind later on just remember we're ready to listen." She turned around and didn't say anything else about it the rest of the way home.

They didn't talk about it when they got home either. They were never going to talk about it if Jason had his way. The only thing he didn't mind talking about was the funeral. He didn't see why he had to go to it and kept saying so, sometimes out loud and sometimes in a worse way. When they told him it was finally time to go he came out of his bedroom wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

"What are you doing?" Kathy asked. "You should be ready by now."

"I am ready."

"No you're not. You can't go wearing that."

"Why not? The shorts are new and my T-shirt's got a pocket in it."

"Go change."

"I don't have anything else to wear."

"I said go change. You're going to make us late."

That thought had occurred to him. "Why can't I just stay here? I don't want to go."

"You have to go. If you don't hurry up and get ready you won't go anywhere for the next two months. You'll lost your radio and computer for two months too."

He shuffled back into the bedroom and changed as slowly as he could to show them how mad he was. By the time he came out again they were a lot madder than he was.

"Wait until we get back home," Kathy fumed. "You and I are going to have one hell of a long talk."

The only reason they didn't miss the beginning of the service was because the priest refused to start without them. He gave them time to get seated and then began the rites, trying to make a ritual that stretched back hundreds of years sound personal.

While he was talking Kathy's eyes and mind started wandering. The church was a big building, too big for the child-sized coffin sitting at the foot of the altar. The coffin was only a speck compared to the towering marble statues, thick stone columns, and arching stained glass windows. Specks weren't important.

'That's what's wrong with this religion,' she thought, 'people aren't important.' She felt guilty the minute she thought it. She should be thanking the church instead of criticizing it, especially since Father Harris had done his best to set them at ease about coming back to it after such a long absence. She and Tim were both lapsed Catholics and it would have been easy to make them feel uncomfortable. All he would have had to do was ask them what they really believed.

One thing Tim was sure he didn't believe was the idea of a 'children's heaven,' the place children supposedly went to if they died before they were baptized. The children could never leave there, and their parents, even if they were good enough to get into the real Heaven, could never go see them. The thought of God creating something that mean was unthinkable. Tim didn't believe it. He couldn't. They'd never had Ricky baptized.

When the service was over, the family followed the coffin and Father Harris down the aisle and out the door to the line of waiting cars. There was a limousine waiting for Tim, Kathy, and Jason, and a hearse waiting for Ricky. The other four cars were filled with the few relatives and family friends they had.

Tim had always wondered what people talked about when they were riding in a limousine like this. He found out they didn't, at least not this time. No one said anything until the hearse suddenly pulled off onto the shoulder of the road.

"What's going on?" Kathy asked the driver.

"I don't know." He pulled in behind it. "I'll go find out." He came back a few minutes later with a look of embarrassment he couldn't hide. "I'm sorry. This has never happened before."

"What?"

"The hearse has got a flat tire. There must have been a nail in the road or something. We're going to have to wait here while they change it."

"I don't believe this," she said, shaking her head. "Don't you have another car that can come out and take its place?"

"All of them are being used right now. Saturday morning is sort of the rush hour for funerals. I'm sorry, but we're just going to have to wait. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes to fix."

She felt like jumping out of the car and kicking the crap out of the other driver. They were on the way to the cemetery, damn it. How could he be stupid enough to run over a nail? She seethed in silence, forcing herself to watch the cars go by. 'Idiots,' she thought, staring back at them as they craned their necks trying to get a glimpse inside the limousine. 'You're all a bunch of idiots going wherever you're going thinking it matters. You're not thinking about death, and that's a big mistake. Sooner or later it's going to ruin your life.'

"All set," the driver said at last. "It'll only take about five more minutes to get the cemetery now."

She had her doubts. Nothing ever went right for her in a car nowadays.

It turned out he was right though, it didn't take more than five minutes to get there, and when they pulled into the cemetery she felt a slight sense of relief, quickly followed by guilt. They were here to bury Ricky. The only thing she should feel was sorrow.

The graveside ceremony was short. She didn't cry, scream, or pray as they lowered his coffin into the open grave. She only made a promise. She promised herself she would never let her kids down again. And she'd never ask God for help.

Chapter 3: Fallout

Young, single, and shallow, Kevin tried to impress Lori with his worldly wit as he poured them both a cup of coffee in the break room. "So, what do you think? Should we cut little Ricky's face out of all the family pictures on Kathy's desk? It might help her forget him."

"Oh stop," Lori said, smiling. "You're so baaaddd."

"And stupid," Kathy said, coming around the corner. Kevin's face suddenly looked like it had been cut by a pair of scissors that left bright red streaks running down his cheeks.

"Sorry," he said, hurrying past her. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know, it was just a joke, right? Next time make sure the joke's funny." That was the first and last time anyone mentioned Ricky all day. Or much of anything else to her for that matter. No one knew what to say so they all made sure they didn't have a spare moment to say anything. Some of them even voluntarily intercepted complaints from customers that she would normally have had to handle. All in all it made her first day back the easiest she'd had in a long time. She knew it wouldn't last though. People could only tiptoe for so long. In less than a month everything was back to normal, with the people working under her weighing the importance of a problem by how much it annoyed them instead of how much it hurt the company.

She was thinking about that when Penny dropped an order on her desk. "I can't enter this because Marketing won't give me a damn price. There's a guy on line 3 I need to transfer over to you too. He called twice yesterday wanting to know where his stuff was and I don't know what to tell him. No one knows anything about it."

"Who's waiting for the price?"

"Ralph Baker. He's the Purchasing Manager for Gutter King."

"And the guy with the missing order?"

"Bill something-or-other. He's with Easy-Fit Siding."

"Okay, give me Ralph first. Tell Bill something-or-other a joke to keep him busy for a couple of minutes."

"You got it."

Ralph barely let her get out a hello before he picked up where he'd left off with Penny. "Hey, what's the matter with you guys? You got something against taking my money or what? I can't get a straight answer out of anyone."

"I know, you'd think we'd try to make it a little easier to do business with us, wouldn't you? Let's see now, Penny said you've been waiting for a quote?"

"She ain't lying. I faxed in the damn P.O. six days ago and still haven't been able to get a price. If you can't do anything about it why don't you just forward that fax to one of your competitors. They're probably doing one hell of a lot of business."

Before she could say anything Barb walked up and motioned that she had to say something. "I think I can probably speed things up. Give me a sec to grab your P.O. out of the files." She put the phone on mute without waiting for his answer. If he was willing to wait he'd still be there when she picked it back up again; if he wasn't then there was just that much less griping she'd have to listen to.

"Union Construction's on the line," Barb said. "They want to know why we haven't sent them the order they put in four weeks ago."

"Why haven't we?"

"Don't know. They're Chris's customer and she's tied up with someone else right now. I figured you might want not want to keep Union waiting since they're so big."

"Okay. Ask them if I can call them back in five minutes. If they can't wait then transfer them now." She knew they probably wouldn't wait and raced to get Ralph's P.O. before the phone could start ringing again. She was just sitting back down when it did.

"Good morning," she said, catching her breath, "how can I help you?"

"You can help me by sending my order," an irritated voice answered. "I thought you people were supposed to have a ten day lead-time."

"We do. Let's see if we can find out what the problem is. Do you have your P.O. number handy?"

"Yeah. It's 49-6817."

"Got it. Give me a second to bring it up on the computer." She switched the phone back to Ralph. "Sorry about the wait. I've got your P.O. right here. Let's see...." She looked at the quotes he'd been given before for pieces about the same size and quickly figured the markups. They went from 111% to 90% to 96% to 104% to 22% as the size increased. Pretty much the normal pattern - nonsensical. She picked 90% for no particular reason and gave him a price for him based on it.

"You know," he said, running the numbers through his own computer, "something's got to be wrong here. How come my price keeps jumping all over the place? Shouldn't it keep going up or down by the inch, instead of back and forth?"

A plant floor supervisor came up and hovered over her, waiting for her to get off the phone. The man from Union was still waiting too, along with Bill something-or-other. She didn't really have time to talk philosophy but a sale was a sale. "Marketing raises the markup as the pieces get bigger."

"Why the hell do they do that? If a 10% profit's good enough for a two foot piece it should be good enough for a three foot piece."

"They say it's because it takes more work to make the three foot piece."

"It might cost more to make but we're talking markups here. You do know what a markup is don't you?"

"Yes, it's the money we make above and beyond the cost. I also know the policy doesn't make any sense."

"Well what about the fluctuations then? How do you explain them?"

'I'd rather not,' she thought to herself, watching the supervisor start to pace in place out of the corner of her eye. "Competitive bids. If a salesman says he has to beat another company's bid then Marketing will give him the price he needs."

"Then why don't I just take bids every time I need a quote for a new size then? Sounds like I'd make out a hell of a lot better."

"You're right. That could save you some money. You might want to take that up with your sales rep."

"It'll cost me time I don't have too." He hung up.

"Just a second," she said to the supervisor, "I've got to give this guy from Union an answer."

"Go ahead, you're not going to want to hear this anyway."

She switched the line back and got a dial tone instead of the Union buyer. "Great. We're going to hear about this for sure. Give me some good news Steve."

"Can't. It's against company policy. Remember that order for Ret-Fit I promised would be done today?"

"It's not going to be?"

"Sure it will. We just can't ship it to them."

"Why not?"

"There's nothing to pack it in. Purchasing said the packers haven't been bringing in the pallet slips when they empty a pallet so as far as they know there's plenty of cardboard out on the floor."

"Can't they go out once in awhile and check?"

"It's not their job. They're just supposed to enter numbers in the computer."

"What about the packers then? Why don't they bring the slips in?"

"It's not their job. They're just supposed to pack, not keep inventory."

"Well whose job is it then?"

"Doesn't seem to be anyone's."

"So what are we supposed to do - let the shit pile up so high it finally falls on the customer's doorstep?"

"Not my job to say," he said, smiling. "I'm glad I'm not the one who's got to tell Ret-Fit though. Those people are a pain in the ass to deal with."

"Kind of like us, huh? What do you say we go see if we can get Purchasing to buy something." They stopped at Chris's desk on the way to find out what the problem was with Union's order.

"I didn't know there was a problem," Chris said, pulling the order from her out basket. "I keyed it in yesterday."

"Did you put a rush order on it?"

"Why? It's not past due yet."

The Plant Manager paged Kathy on the intercom, telling her to come to his office right away. "What do you mean it's not past due? It was sent in four weeks ago."

"I know, but I didn't put it in until yesterday. With a ten day lead-time that gives us another eight days to make it."

Kathy shook her head. "That's not how we figure lead-time. It starts on the day we get it - not the day we key it into the computer."

"Geez, that doesn't sound fair to the people out on the floor. Sometimes that would make the order due before they even got a chance to start on it."

"It was due before they started it. The due date is when it's really due - not when we'd like it to be due." The Plant Manager paged her again, using the word 'immediately' this time. "Fix this order, send it out to the floor, and then fix any others that need fixing. Steve, he's got to have Union on the line to sound that pissed off. Can you make the case to Purchasing for me?"

"That's not my job." He smiled. "But I'll do it anyway."

"Thanks. I owe you one." She ran down the hall to the Plant Manager's office, completely forgetting about the call from Bill something-or-other.

"You wanted to see me?"

He glared at her. "Yes." He motioned for her to sit down and put the phone on conference. "Mr. Blake, the customer service supervisor is here with us now. I'm sure she'll be able to help us straighten this all out. Kathy, what happened to Union's last order?"

"There was a paperwork mix-up. It didn't get put into the computer until yesterday. I put a rush on it though, so you should have it sometime within the next three days."

"Three more days?" They could almost hear him shaking his head. "How could it get screwed up that bad? No, never mind. Just tell me if this is the kind of service I can expect from now on, because if it is you can expect to lose at least one customer - me."

"This won't happen again," the plant manager said. "I can guarantee that. It was a one-shot screwup."

"You better hope so." He hung up on them, leaving Kathy to face the plant manager's hardening glare alone.

"He's right, you better hope so. I want to know why it took so long to get that order into the computer."

"Poor training. I've already started to fix the problem."

"Name names."

"Do I have to?"

"Not if you want to be the one that gets fired for it."

It was a tempting offer, but she had bills to pay. "Christine made the mistake. No one taught her the right way to calculate a promised delivery date."

"Well they missed their chance then. Get rid of her."

"But that's -"

"And then take care of these." He handed her a stack of credit memos. The first one was for 100,000 pieces of aluminum in 152 foot lengths. "Teach your people some commonsense while you're at it. A 152 foot piece of metal is longer than any truck on the road. That's supposed to be 152 inches. The 250 million dollar price tag should have given them a clue."

"Alright. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Make sure all of those credits show up on this month's activity report for your department."

"But that'll make us look like idiots."

"It's be accurate." He looked down at the papers on his desk to signal her dismissal.

'Sometimes I hate this job,' she thought on the way out of his office, 'and sometimes I really really hate it.' She went back to make a note on the wall calendar and noticed the 'twins birthday' was still on next month's sheet. She erased it and wrote 'Cody's birthday'. That put her in just the right mood to fire Chris.

"One head?" Cody asked, tapping his forehead.

"Yes, one head," she said, wiping him with a washcloth.

He smiled at her and then continued counting and tapping his head. "One head, two head, three head, four head. I have four heads?"

"No, you only have one."

"This my four head?" he asked, pointing at his forehead again.

"Yes, but it's not spelled the same way."

He thought about it for awhile and then gave her an understanding look. "One head, two head, three head, four head...I have four heads." He was convinced of it now and wasn't going to be talked out of it. At least not until it was time to buy him a hat.

"Okay, you can have four heads for now." She lifted him out of the tub and sat him on the rug. "Let's get you all dried off and then I'll clip your fingernails."

"Clip my footnails too?"

She rubbed his hair playfully. "Yes, I'm going to clip your footnails too."

"Kathy I've got a problem with this order from Clean Line," Diane said.

"What's wrong with it?"

"We don't make the profile they want anymore. Steve says Corporate sold the machine that makes it when they closed down the Shawnee plant."

"Why'd they do that?"

"They were only getting ten thousand feet a year in sales out of it."

"But those ten thousand feet are tied to a deal that gives us four million in sales off of another machine. Didn't anyone mention that to Corporate?"

"I know I didn't. They don't come down here asking for my advice. What do you want me to tell the customer?"

"Tell him we're idiots."

"I think he already suspects that."

On the way home from work that night there was a story on the radio about three little girls whose mom didn't meet them at the bus stop when they came home from school yesterday. The oldest girl, a third grader, walked the younger two home after waiting more than an hour for their mom to show up. They had to wait for her again on their front steps because she wasn't at home either and they didn't have a key to let themselves in. Neighbors finally figured out something was wrong and called social services. Tonight the little girls were in a shelter, still waiting for their mom.

Hearing that, Kathy felt better. At least she wasn't as bad as that mother. Even though she'd lost Ricky she hadn't deserted her family, taken up drinking, or started doing drugs. She didn't even come close to being movie-of-the-week material yet, although there were times when she wanted to run right through the list just to get to the place where nothing mattered.

"Kathy," Penny called over the cubicles, "I've got another one for you." She waved the handset of her phone so Kathy could see it. "Ret-Fit's got a complaint about the order we just sent them."

"Not the one we were three weeks late on?"

"Yup, that's the one. "

"Switch it over here. Diane, don't tell Clean Line anything. Tell them I'll call them back in a bit."

"Okay, but you don't have much time. Ferguson said they were complaining to him about it and we better take care of it or he'll take it upstairs."

"He's the goddamn sales rep. Let him take care of it if he's in such a hurry. He can lie better than me anyway." She picked up the phone. "Hello Mr. Bolleski?" she said, using her official sweet tone. "How can I help you?"

"Honey, you could start by writing me a check to cover what it's gonna cost me to fix your mistake."

"Sounds like the plant screwed up again."

"Big time. I ordered 30,000 pieces in 12 different lengths. That comes out to about 600 cartons. The only problem is they mixed different lengths in each carton and then just put one size on the box. Now I don't know what the hell I've got sitting out on the dock. Instead of spot-checking every tenth one my receivers have got to open each one up - "

"Kathy, Ferguson's on the line," Diane said. "He wants to talk to you. Right now."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Tell him I'll be there in a minute."

"Hello hello?" Bolleski said. "You still there or am I talking to myself?"

"Sorry about that. I'm still here. You were saying?"

"Not that you should pay any attention to me, I'm just a customer after all, but I was saying my receivers have got to open up each carton now and count what's inside. I'm not about to eat the cost for that either."

"Kathy, Ferguson says he can't wait."

"I'm sure we can get you some kind of credit to cover the cost. Give me a chance to talk to the Marketing about it, okay?"

"How long will that take?"

"Can you give me until the back half of this afternoon?"

"We both know nothing happens there that fast."

'Oh I don't know about that,' she thought to herself, 'people seem to get fired awfully fast around here.' "You never know, this time might be different. One of their people is actually waiting to talk to me. He'll help if he's got something to gain from it, like another piece to add to his territory."

"Tell him he's the only chance your company's got. If he doesn't come through I'm going to take my money somewhere else. And I'll be sure to let plenty of people know why." He slammed the phone down.

"Should I switch Ferguson over now?" Diane asked.

Kathy stared at the phone on her desk, hating the thought of having to pick it up again. "No. Tell him I went home sick." She was sick too. Sick of the sales reps, the customers, and that damn phone. She grabbed her purse and left.

"We're going to make a candy run," Tim said.

"Can I go with you?" Cody asked.

"No, just me and Jason are going this time."

"Pulleeaasssse."

"No. Stay here with mommy. She wants you to be with her for awhile."

"No she doesn't. You want it to be quiet, don't you mommy?"

Kathy couldn't dodge Ferguson forever, and he was waiting for her the minute she walked in the next day.

"You want to tell me why you sold the machine I need for the 612 profile?"

"Corporate sold it - not me. Have you asked them?"

"No, I'm asking you what you're going to do about it. You're in charge of customer service. Make my customer happy."

"All I can do is try. Let me call Raleigh and see if they can do anything." It was a long shot, but Ferguson didn't try to stop her. He didn't have any other ideas, either better or worse. Kathy called Raleigh and made it as far as the receptionist's desk before running into a problem. "Hi, is Dana there?" Dana was the customer service supervisor up there and if anyone was going to take a minute to help them it would be her.

"I'm sorry, but she's in a meeting right now."

"Any idea how long it'll last?"

"Probably until lunch. There's a lot of people in there and they're all going to want to say something."

"Okay. How about putting me through to Gail then?"

"She's in the meeting too."

"Well, who can I talk to? Everyone can't be in the meeting."

"Sorry, but they are. It's a full staff meeting."

"I don't believe it. What do you tell the customers when they call in?"

"The same thing - no one's available."

"Shit, they must love to hear that."

"They don't."

"No kidding. Please have someone call me as soon as it's over. There's a four million dollar customer waiting for an answer."

The minute she put the phone down Ferguson threw his hands up in the air in disgust. "Hell of a lot of good that did. What are you going to do next?"

"I guess we'll just have to wait for them to call back."

The phone rang.

"We can't just wait. I need an answer now. If that's anyone but Raleigh you tell them you'll have to get back to them and hang up. We've got to get this problem taken care of first." Somehow he'd gotten it into his head that he was her boss. Just like he was the boss of anyone who made less money than him.

She answered the phone and almost dropped it when she heard who was on the other end. It was Bolleski, wondering where that credit was that she'd promised him yesterday afternoon. She had to explain how she'd gone home sick and hadn't been able to reach Marketing yet.

"I'm sorry you got sick," Bolleski said, "but that's not my problem. My problem is I need an answer and I need it now."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't been able to get one yet. Can I have just a little more time?"

"No. Do I get the credit or not?"

Ferguson started making little circles with one of his hands, motioning for her to hurry up and hang up.

"I'm sure we can get you some, I'm just not sure how much."

"That means nothing to me. There's a big difference between a buck and a thousand bucks. I want to know how many zeros I'm going to see after the number one."

Ferguson couldn't wait any longer. "Well what are we going to tell my customer?" he demanded, ignoring the fact that she was still on the phone.

"I'm waiting," Bolleski said. "How many zeros are there going to be?"

"We can't just leave him hanging," Ferguson went on. "He needs an answer and I'm not leaving here until you give me give me one."

"Hello, are you still there?" Bolleski said. "What the hell's going on over there."

"So what's the answer? I want it now. Not two days from now, not two minutes from now. Now, as in right now. Period."

"Here," she said, handing him the phone. "when you find all the answers give one to this guy. I don't work here anymore. As of right now. Period."

Kathy came back out of the bathroom to do the supper dishes. They weren't on the table, in the sink, in the dishwasher, or put away on the shelves. Cody stood in the middle of the kitchen smiling at her.

"Where are the dishes Cody?" she asked.

"Dishes work. Work make mommy mad. Make work go away."

"What did you do with them?"

"Throw away. Are you happy at me?"

It was hard to find another job after quitting the way she did, but she finally found one. And it was just what she wanted - boring as hell. This time there were no sales reps, customers, or phones. There was only the sound of conveyer belts and gossip. It was an easy job. All she had to do was take a stack of inserts off of a pallet, shake them a couple of times to keep them from sticking together, and then put them in the feeder. The feeder stuffed them into newspapers at the rate of thirty a minute, a fast pace, but one she could keep up with pretty easily as long as she didn't drop a stack. There was even time left over for thinking. She didn't use it.

"Miss Melody said Cody was a good boy today," Tim said as the two of them came in.

"That's good to hear," she said, not looking up from the magazine she was reading. Cody wanted more attention than that so he jumped up in her lap to give her a big hug and accidentally banged his head into her lip, splitting it. "Get off!" she yelled, holding her hand to her mouth to keep the blood from dripping on the sofa. "Why can't you watch what you're doing!" she said. She went to the bathroom to stop the bleeding and slammed the door behind her.

Cody quietly walked over to the chair Tim was sitting in and climbed up in his lap. "I guess I wasn't a good boy today," he said softly, trying not to cry.

Monday were always good days now. After two days off she could finally get back to the conveyor belts and their soothing rhythm. They sounded like metal waves rolling up a beach of steel sand as they washed away her anger, slowly making her forgot how mad she was at God for taking Ricky, at Tim for blaming her, and at Jason for not caring. At the end of a long shift all the emotion was gone. And she could sleep again.

Cody slammed the door when he was sent to his bedroom for not picking up his toys when he was told.

"Get back out here!" Kathy said.

He came out again and slowly walked over to her. She spanked him on the leg as soon as he was close enough. "You do what you're told without throwing a fit," she said. "Next time I'll spank you harder." She went to her room and slammed the door.

"I can never have a perfect day," he said quietly.

"You mean where everything you do is right?" Tim asked.

"No, where everything I do is fun."

Later that night, when it looked like she wasn't mad anymore, he went and stood in front of the TV while she was trying to watch it. He wasn't

trying to make her mad, he just really wanted to ask her something and that was the only way to get her attention. At some point she'd become almost addicted to it, losing herself in worlds where the sun was pretty instead of hot and the bugs only bit other people. She even watched the bad shows, knowing they couldn't be any worse than life with the TV off. And unlike life, there was always the chance that the next hour would be better.

"What?"

"Mommy, what would you give up forever, TV or me?"

"That's a stupid question. The TV of course. Now will you get out of the way so I can see what happens next."

Chapter 4: Let's Play

Cody ran around the daycare center picking up every piece of paper he'd managed to draw something on. There was a story behind each one and he wanted his dad to hear all of them. He couldn't wait until they got home to do it either. The minute they were in the car he stuck one a couple of inches in front of Tim's face and said, "See my picture? I'll be mad if you pee on it."

"I'm not going to pee on it," Tim said, taking a quick look at it before putting it in the backseat. "Did Miss Cindy say you were a good boy today?"

"That's what she didn't say."

Tim glanced over at him. "Why didn't she say that?" He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer but had to ask anyway. That's what dad's did.

"Because."

"Because is a word not a reason. Why didn't she say you were a good boy?"

"Lori made me mad. I tell her she's pretty and then ask her to marry me, but she says no."

"Then what did you do?"

"Kicked her. Miss Cindy made me sit in time-out. But Lori was the bad one. She made me mad."

"You can't kick someone just because they make you mad."

"I did."

"I know. And that's why Miss Cindy made you sit in time-out. Did you tell Lori you were sorry?"

"Something stinks in here. Everybody smell your pants."

Tim looked out the window to keep Cody from seeing him smile. "Don't change the subject. Did you tell Lori you were sorry?"

"Check your toes."

He repeated the question several times before finally getting a 'no' out of him. "I want you to tell her you're sorry tomorrow, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because you shouldn't have kicked her."

"But she made me mad."

"You should still say you're sorry."

"Why?"

"You hurt her."

"She hurt me."

He gave up. "Never mind."

"Can we go to the flip-bars today?" 'Flip-bars' was Cody's word for playground since that's what he did on the bars there.

"I don't know. It doesn't sound like you were a very good boy today." He wanted to say no but that would have started a battle he just didn't have the energy to fight right now.

"I'll be your best friend."

"We'll see."

"Fine," Cody said, crossing his arms in front of his chest, "I won't be your best friend then." He didn't say another word the rest of the way home and would have kept it up longer if it hadn't been for the two big sheets of plywood leaning against his bed. He had to find out what those were for.

"What's that?" he asked.

"They're for a wall. I'm going to build one between your bed and Jason's so you can each have your own room."

"Are you going to draw a door on it?"

It took a minute to figure that one out. "No, this isn't a cartoon. There's going to be a real door in it."

"Are burglars real?"

"Some are." He went into the kitchen and opened a can of soup for their supper. Kathy was working the late shift again so he was the cook. "Why, did you see one?"

"In my dreams. I always have bad dreams at night."

"You should think about something good just before you go to sleep. Then you'll have good dreams."

He thought about it, then said, "Being born was the best thing."

This time Tim let him see his smile. "I think so too."

"Can we go to the flip-bars?"

"You're not going to give up on that one, are you?"

"Nope."

"Okay. We'll go after supper if it's not raining." Judging from the clouds he'd seen on the way home, it was a good bet they'd be a nasty storm overhead before dessert was served. "Do you want to watch a movie while I get supper ready?"

"Sure."

"Which one? Robin Hood? Peter Pan? The Little Mermaid?"

"Terminator."

It was a better choice than it sounded. Nothing kept Cody's attention like a little mayhem. This time was no exception either. Once the movie was rolling Tim didn't hear another peep out of him until supper was ready.

"Can we go to the flip-bars now?" he asked, walking to the table backwards so he wouldn't miss any of the show.

"I said we'd go after supper if it's not raining."

Cody looked outside. "It's not raining now."

"It's not after supper either."

"I'm not hungry. Can we go now?"

"Eat."

"Where's Jason?"

"He's mowing someone's lawn. He'll eat when he gets done."

"He's a bad boy. He should eat first."

Tim rolled his eyes. Short days and five year olds just didn't go together. "Jason's doing what I told him he could do. You should too."

"Okay." One bowl of soup, two cookies, and a dish of ice cream later, it still hadn't started to rain. "Can we go now?"

"Are you sure you really want to? We're going to get soaked if it starts raining."

"That's okay."

Seeing no way out, Tim finally gave in and took him.

The playground wasn't the kind that attracted a lot of players. All it had was a basketball court with no nets on the hoops, a rusty pair of monkey bars built at different heights for different ages, and a row of what looked like metal hurdles. Those last things were what Cody called flip-bars. He'd grab onto one and flip himself over and over again until he was too dizzy to stand up straight. Then he'd stagger around like a drunk until the world stopped spinning and go right back to do it again.

No one else was around so Tim didn't have to fight anyone for the playground's only bench. On hot days you had to get there at dawn to claim a spot on it since it was under the only shade tree, but today the same clouds that had chased everyone else away had also covered the field in shadows that were getting darker by the minute. There was an ocean of rain in those clouds and it was going to get dumped on them pretty soon.

Cody didn't seem to notice. He liked the gusting winds that came with them and was disappointed when they stopped. Every sound suddenly stopped right then too.

Seconds later the lightning hit. Neither of them saw it but Cody spun around in time to see long strips of bark go shooting off of the tree. He also saw his dad fall to the ground playing dead. That was the kind of gruesome game only a dad would play - you'd never catch anyone's mom doing it - and he ran over to play along.

Jumping onto his dad's back, he said in a singsong voice, "Time to get up sleepy head." When his dad didn't move he bent down so they were nose to nose and pried open an eyelid. "I know you're awake. You can't fool me."

That didn't work either, so he put a hand over his dad's mouth and pinched his nose shut to keep him from breathing. After a couple of minutes he decided to try something else. "Something stinks here," he said, remembering the smile his dad had tried to hide in the car. "Everybody smell your pants." His dad's lips didn't move.

"Come on, wake up. It's starting to rain." He tried tickling him, then yanked his hair real hard. Nothing worked. "This isn't fun," he said, rolling him over onto his side. The dirt was turning into mud and he didn't want him to get all dirty. "I want to go home now."

There was no answer.

"Please."

Still no answer.

After a few more minutes he hugged his dad and whispered 'You're scaring me.' His dad never did that. When he didn't stop doing it now Cody knew something really was wrong. He didn't know what to do about it though. In school they'd taught him to call 911 when someone was hurt but they'd never taught him what to do when there wasn't a phone. He forced his dad's eyes open again. "Please wake up." Nothing. He hugged him harder, partly for reassurance, partly for warmth. It was getting colder and being wet made it worse. He began shivering as the rain came down harder. When he was shaking so hard he couldn't stand it any more he kissed his dad on the cheek and ran toward the car. Halfway there he stopped and looked back, not wanting to leave him there all alone. He couldn't go back though, he was too cold, so he turned around again and ran the rest of the way to the car.

It wasn't much warmer in the car but at least the wind wasn't making it any colder. After awhile the windows began to fog up and he had to keep wiping them off to see out. He didn't want to miss it when his dad started moving again. Everything would be alright then. He kept watching, waiting, and hoping, while the rain kept drumming and drumming on the roof above him. Nothing changed for a long time, and then it started to get darker. Night

was coming. He remembered people prayed when they wanted something good to happen so he said the only prayer he knew.

"God is great, god is good, let us thank him for our food. Amen."

He waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Slowly he began to realize nothing would. Sometimes even God didn't have a star day.

'This is all daddy's fault,' he thought, curling up in the seat. 'He knew it was going to rain. He should have just said no, we can't go. I would have still been his best friend.'

Chapter 5: Christmas Drugs

Cody quietly twirled the loose thread inside his pocket into a hard pebble and squeezed it between his thumb and index finger. For some reason that made him feel better. The rest of the mourners had gone home, leaving him alone with his mom. It wasn't exactly a comforting thought.

"I want to be a cartoon when I grow up."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Why?"

"Cartoons don't die."

The emptiness in his voice was something she'd never heard before. It made her go over and sit down beside him. "It'll be alright," she said, putting her arm around him. She didn't see him flinch.

A few more minutes passed in silence.

"Are we bad?"

"No," she said, "we're not bad. What makes you think that?"

"God hates us."

"Don't be silly. He doesn't hate us."

"Then how come he killed daddy and Ricky?"

"He didn't kill them. Sometimes storms and accidents just happen. When they do there's nothing anyone can do about it."

"Not even God?"

"Well..." It was a good question, one she didn't have an answer for. "He could, but he doesn't. Maybe if we start going to church again we can find out why."

"Will he like us better if we do?"

"I told you he doesn't hate us. Bad things just happen."

"He lets them happen."

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's go to church."

"Alright. We'll start next Sunday. That's when they hold Mass."

"Why can't we go now?"

"No one's there right now."

"Not even God?"

She smiled. This was going to be hard to explain. "He's there but the priests aren't. God speaks through them so they're the ones we have to listen to."

"God can't talk to us?"

"He talks to his priests and they talk to us."

Cody thought about it for a little while and decided it made sense. He'd never heard God speak before but he knew priests could. The one who'd spoken at his dad's funeral seemed like he was going to go on and on forever. He hoped the next one wouldn't need that many words to tell him why the bad things happened.

When Sunday came his mom found them an empty seat near the back. It had been a long time since she'd been to Mass and didn't want everyone staring at her.

"How can we talk to the priest from way back here?" Cody asked.

"Shhh," she said. "We're not supposed to talk during Mass."

"We've got to be quiet the whole time?" That sounded impossible.

"Yes."

"Then how are we going to ask him about the bad things?"

"We don't ask him. We listen to what he says and try to figure things out that way. Now just do what I do and we'll see what he says."

The Mass began before he could say how stupid that sounded, which was a good thing for his backside. Getting spanked for being a nuisance wouldn't have made things any clearer. So instead of arguing he started copying her. That seemed to go well. As long as he was on his knees, feet, and butt at the same time as she was everyone seemed happy. The few times he missed the beat he was put back on track by warning glances from people sitting nearby.

While copying her went well for the most part, actually paying attention to the priest was another matter. After a couple of minutes he didn't even

try. It all sounded like Latin to him. Instead, he stared at the little cross patterns etched into the lights up above and found out that if he looked at them long enough they'd start drifting across the ceiling. It was fun to follow them with his eyes and try to catch them. He could never catch them of course, but it made the time pass easier. He also found out that if he stared at the statue of Jesus up on the altar long enough it would look like he was waving goodbye.

Going to church every Sunday quickly became a tradition, one Jason refused to take part in. His stubbornness created a second tradition - the Sunday Morning Argument.

"I just don't understand why you won't even try it," Kathy said, forgetting how many times she'd already said it. "Would it kill you to go just once?"

He felt like saying it killed Christ didn't it, but he knew better. That would only have made the argument louder and longer. "No, it wouldn't kill me. It wouldn't help me either. Church just isn't my thing."

"What, you're too good for God?"

"No, there's no such thing as god. He's just something people made up to make themselves feel better about dying."

"I'll bet a lot of people in hell thought the same thing."

"You might not want to hear it mom, but hell's empty."

"What do you mean?"

"People don't really live in fairy tale places. Don't you know the priests just changed the names of things to make them sound more modern? This time around we're getting God instead of Zeus, saints instead of little gods, and heaven instead of Olympus. It's all a bunch of crap. The only thing that's real is the world we're in right now."

The fact that Jason had given some thought to what he believed caught Kathy by surprise. It took her a minute to get back in the battle again.

"Damn, you're smart," she said after she'd recovered. "So tell me great guru, what happens to us when we die then."

"Nothing happens. We're like batteries - when our energy runs out we die. That's all there is to it. There's nothing left. No energy, no soul, no nothing."

"Is that what happened to Ricky and your dad then? Their batteries just ran out?"

Jason's eyes narrowed to two angry slits. "You tell me. You were there when Ricky died. Did you see a bunch of angels come down and pick him up?"

"No, but I don't see any battery posts sticking out of your head either."

"The battery's inside my head. Just like all that god shit is inside yours." He turned and stomped out of the house, slamming the door behind him. That was part of the tradition too.

Kathy always ended it by turning to Cody, who'd be quietly watching it, and saying, "I hope you don't turn out like him."

"Me too." It was the right response. If there was one thing he didn't want it was having her yell at him. Jason was bigger and a lot stronger than she was so he was safe. He could even move out and live on his own now if he wanted to. Cody couldn't say the same about himself. She was bigger than him and could hurt him whenever she wanted to so it was up to him to make sure she didn't want to. He did whatever she told him to do even when it didn't make any sense, like going to confession when he didn't have anything to confess.

The first time that that happened was the worst. "Bless me father for I have sinned," he began, "it's been one week since my last confession and these are my sins." A moment of silence followed. Then two moments. Then three. He knelt there trying to think of something he'd done wrong during the past week but couldn't think of a thing. It was more than awkward, it was scary. He couldn't say he hadn't sinned, the priest would get mad at him

for wasting his time. He couldn't just get up and walk out either. His mom would demand to know why he didn't have any penance to say and then start yelling at him for trying to claim he'd been perfect. She was likely to do a lot more than just yell too. He knew the priest was getting tired of waiting for him to say something so he finally did. "Father, I disobeyed my mother three times and lied to her once. I also took some money off of my brother's desk when he wasn't home. I felt bad about it though and put it back later."

"That feeling bad about taking the money is called guilt," the priest said. "And it's good that you felt it. That feeling will always let you know whether you're doing something that will bring you closer to God or take you further away from Him. Let it be your guide. Now go say three Our Father's and three Hail Mary's as penance for your sins."

He left the confessional and went up to the altar rail to say his penance. He didn't feel guilty about making up those sins. He felt relieved that the priest believed him. And happy that now he knew how to get through confession without making anybody mad.

From that day on he made up sins as the need arose. Since major ones would have risked drawing as much attention as none at all, he always made sure the fake ones were reasonable for someone his age. Lying to his mom, fighting with his brother, disrespecting an adult - that sort of thing. He usually wound up with a respectable penance of three or four Hail Mary's and a couple of Our Father's. It was a good solution, one that kept his mom happy and him safe. God didn't seem to mind either. He never said anything about it.

Lent turned out to be a much bigger problem than confession. That surprised him since it was one of the few religious practices he liked. Lent gave him a chance to show God he could make a promise and keep it.

Each year he tried to pick a harder sacrifice to show how strong his faith was. When he was eight he gave up candy; when he was nine he gave up Saturday morning cartoons; when he was ten he gave up riding his bike; when

he was eleven he gave up TV five nights a week; and when he was twelve he was stumped. It was hard to think of something he liked more than watching TV. As Lent got closer and closer he began to panic. He had to give up something and it had to be major. Two days before the start of Lent he finally found what he was looking for. It was his most favorite thing in the world and it would be far more difficult to give up than any of the things he'd sacrificed before. God would have to like him for giving it up. At the beginning of Lent he made a solemn promise. This was the year he'd give up masturbation.

At first it was easy . All he had to do was go explore the woods near his house or find a good show on TV to keep himself distracted. That seemed to work just fine. As he made it past each day without masturbating his confidence grew a little more and by the end of the first week he knew he could make it all the way. He was so sure of it that he decided to put himself to a real test. One afternoon, during the hour he always had to himself after Jason had left for work and before his mom came home, he pulled the bottom drawer out of his desk and picked up one of the magazines hidden under it. It was an old issue of Cavalier with the standard three sets of naked women pictures in it. The pictures alone would have been a minor test of his vow. It took the addition of one of his favorite fantasies to raise it up to the level of a major test.

In this fantasy he was sitting on the examining table in a doctor's office. It didn't matter what he was there for. What did matter was that the nurse, who looked exactly like the brunette he was staring at in the magazine, had told him to pull down his pants on her way out of the room. As he sat there on the table with his pants down around his ankles he thought about her and what would happen if she came back into the room. It didn't take long for him to get an erection both in his fantasy and in real life. Then the nurse came back in and saw it. He thought she'd be mad but she only smiled at him. "Having a little problem, are we?" she asked, moving closer. He didn't know what to say so he just shook his head yes. "Well, let's take

care of it so you won't be embarrassed when the doctor comes in." She pulled a towel out of one of the drawers and lightly placed it on top of his erection. Then she put her hand around it and....he snapped the magazine shut. Enough testing for one day he thought, and stuck it back in its' hiding place. He waited a couple of minutes for his erection to go away and then went outside to find something else to do. That was hard to do when all he could think about was what the nurse might have done if he'd let his fantasy run just a little bit longer. He did it though, and soon he was seeing how high he could climb on the tallest tree in the woods. A pleasant thought hung in the back of his mind though, one he half-wished would go away. It was that the nurse had plenty of time - she was patiently waiting for him in the magazine and in his head. She knew he'd be back.

She was wrong, he thought. There was no way he was going to look at that magazine again, at least not until after Lent was over. He could do it. After all, how hard could it be to keep his hands away from himself for the next three weeks? The answer turned out to be 'pretty hard'. One day was easy, two was bearable, three was a challenge. On the fourth day he was ready for another test. Or at least that's what he told himself when he pulled out the magazine again. Sure enough, the nurse was waiting there for him. She quickly had him back on the table with his pants down around his ankles and his erection covered by the small towel. "I knew you'd be back," she said, wrapping her fingers around the towel. "Relax. It's okay. Everything's going to be all right. In a few seconds you'll feel better than you've ever felt before." She squeezed her fingers tighter and slowly slid her hand up and down. "That feels good, doesn't it?" He nodded, still afraid to speak. "Sure it does. And the faster I go the better it will feel." She moved hand up and down a little faster to show him. "See what I mean?" He saw, and knew he should put the magazine away again. Right now. He told himself to do it, and didn't. Instead he watched her hand move faster and faster in his fantasy. His own hand was moving faster and faster

too. He didn't think about stopping anymore. He forgot everything except the feeling and rocked back and forth as it grew stronger and stronger. "It's time" she whispered in his ear. She pulled down hard and he came, filling the towel and his underwear with cum. "That's a good boy," she said. She kept pumping until she was sure he was empty. When he was he opened his eyes he realized he'd lost. He hadn't been able to make the sacrifice.

That was the end of Lent for him, and the beginning of the strange feeling that he was different from other people. Not different because he'd masturbated, he was pretty sure everyone did that. Trying to give it up for Lent was pretty weird though. And so were some other things. Like whatever it was that was inside of him always watching people, weighing their words and wisdom. It'd been doing that ever since he was six or seven. It was old, almost ancient, and waiting to see why the world was the way it was. It had already seen enough to know neither Jason nor his mom had the answer.

Jason had taken the easy way out, picking the great 'nothing' for his god. In his world dead babies were meaningless, random events in a random universe. What happened happened. If you were lucky good things happened. If you weren't then bad things happened. That was that. Nothing you could do about it, no one to thank and no one to blame.

His mom's choice had been a little more complicated. She'd picked a 'god' who wanted people to mature into good souls. He didn't do anything to make sure those people weren't killed before they'd had the chance to grow, but the thought was there. He also didn't leave people wandering around wondering what was right and wrong. He'd made the difference between them very clear - follow the commandments and you were right, disobey them and you were damned for all eternity. Seemed like a simple enough choice. And a lot of simple people believed in it. Like his mom. When she wore the uniform of Catholicism she made sure she put on the clean one. The examples of Mother Teresa, St. James, and Jesus came fast and often when you talked to her about religion. The hundreds of thousands of other names that hinted there were

dirty uniforms in the hamper were never mentioned. The older he got, the harder he found it to ignore the smell.

The crimes of long dead priests weren't the only things that bothered him though. The cross itself was a problem. He knew it was supposed to symbolize God's love for man, that's why images of it were everywhere, but it was also the legal means of execution back in Christ's day. He had to wonder what would happen if today's counterpart had been used instead. Would people really kneel down and pray to a huge statue of Christ strapped into an electric chair with a hood over His head? Would the sight of His eyeballs flowing down his cheeks as the current melted them be just as comforting as the sight of blood flowing from the nail wounds. He doubted it. The market for necklaces with little electric chairs dangling from the end of them would likely be a very small one.

When it came right down to it, he had his doubts about Christ too. What kind of man was 'perfect'? Okay, the church said it was the god kind. But if Christ was god then what good did it do for him to come down here and set an example? Didn't being god kind of give him an edge?

And what about Mary? She created her own Creator. Didn't that give her a headache?

It seemed like new questions popped up every day and none of them came with answers anyone was willing to share. He finally turned to Nature for a clue, reasoning that once you took away Man there was nothing standing between what God wanted and what God got. When he took a close look at that he could only find one rule God had put into effect - the survival of the fittest. Nature seemed intent on producing the most efficient predator possible. He couldn't quite see himself going to the 'Church of the Best Beast' so that brought him back to the Catholic Church.

There had to be a better answer he thought glumly as he listened to the priest repeat standard prayer number thirty-eight. The universe couldn't be as stupid as religions made it out to be. His eyes wandered from the priest

to the little box up on the altar that always had a candle burning in it. A long time ago his mom had told him that the light was the spirit of God, and it was always there because He was always with them. It was out now.

Chapter 6: Big Game Hunting

"There's lots of ways to steal something without getting caught," Charlie said.

"Yeah right." Cody brushed an ant off of his arm, trying not to break its legs as he did.

"You don't believe me?"

"No."

"Shit, I guess I'll just have to prove it to you then." He went inside and came back out a couple of minutes later with a carton of cigarettes and a glue stick. "Watch this." He opened the bottom of the carton and pulled out the packs, laying them on the porch floor in front of him as he did. When the carton was empty he carefully undid the bottom fold on each pack, pulled out a cigarette, then glued the fold back up. "See?" he said, sticking the packs back into the carton, "no one ever counts the cigarettes in a pack to make sure they weren't gyped out of one. That's the first rule of stealing. Don't let the person know anything's been stolen."

Cody felt something crawling up his arm and looked down. The ant was back again, making its way towards his elbow. He swatted it and flicked its crumpled body off his arm. Sometimes being nice just didn't work. "What's the second rule?"

"Don't get greedy. You get greedy you get caught."

"And you've never been caught?"

"You've known me a long time. Ever seen me get busted?"

Cody had to admit that as far as anyone else knew, Charlie was just a normal, walking-the-line kind of kid. "Okay, so you've gotten away with stealing cigarettes. Big deal."

"That's not all I've gotten away with."

Cody gave him a questioning look and got a smile back in return.

"Alright, go ahead and tell me. What else have you done?"

"You sure you want to know? You could get in trouble just for knowing about it and not telling anyone."

"No one's going to blame me for not telling on you. It's not my job to tell and I couldn't prove you weren't just bragging even if I did."

Charlie silently ran through his list of rules for being a good thief and didn't find any against letting Cody in on a few of his past exploits. He was right about no one believing him even if he told. "Okay, I'll trust you. At least with one of the stories. You'll have to put more on the line than just your word to hear the rest of them though."

About a year ago I was at a yard sale looking at this big old dollhouse that had everything you could think of in it. There were bookshelves, pictures, dishes, the works. It even had a little umbrella in the umbrella stand by the door. The damn thing worked too. So I told them I needed a present for my baby sister and they let me buy the whole thing for two bucks. The umbrella was the only thing I really wanted though. I glued a couple of extra pieces of cloth outside it and took it down to that Holiday Inn over on 98. They've got outside halls there with drink machines so I slopped another layer of super glue onto the umbrella, worked it up into the change slot, popped it open, and then used the backside of the slot door to push it up the shaft as far as it would go. After holding it there a couple of minutes to let the glue set, I walked away like nothing had happened and stayed gone 'til the next morning. When I went back I brought a long fishhook with me so I could snag the umbrella. A whole shitload of coins came down when I yanked on it. Made my two bucks back plus another eight or nine."

"Didn't anyone complain about not getting their change?"

"How the fuck should I know? They got their drinks so they probably didn't bitch about it too much."

"You'd think the cops would've started looking for you after pulling that trick a few times."

"I didn't do it a few times. I did it once. Remember rule number two, you get greedy you get caught."

Cody was beginning to see Charlie in a whole new light. "So when's you're next big job?"

"Tonight. Want to come along?"

"Maybe. What're you going to do?"

"You'll have to come to find out. I can't give it away ahead of time."

"I'll pass then. If I'm going to do something wrong I want to know what it is before I do it."

"You won't have to do anything wrong. You can watch from the sidelines."

Cody mulled it over. Up until now he'd never done anything that came close to being dangerous or illegal. If he could do it without getting caught, the adventure might be worth it. "Okay, count me in."

"Good. We leave at seven tonight. Tell your parents we're going to the mall so they won't have an easy way to check up on you."

Cody nodded and got up to leave. "Do I need to bring anything special?"

"Nope. Just wear something dark."

"Okay." He started walking home, nagged all the way by second thoughts. Charlie had made it sound like there was no chance they'd get caught but what did he know. Just because he'd gotten away with a few little things didn't mean he could get away with everything. He might try to pull off something really stupid tonight just to show how smart he was. Cody worried about it all through supper and the rest of the way back to Charlie's house. After that he was more curious than scared.

"So what's the plan?" he asked, keeping pace with Charlie as they headed off down the street.

Charlie pulled a sock full of coins out of his backpack and held it in front of him. "Tonight we give this away," he said, cupping his free hand

under it to catch the clump of coins if the seams suddenly gave out. "It's got about 15 bucks worth of nickels in it."

"Sounds like a great plan to me. Nobody can call us thieves if we just give money away. They might call us a couple of other things though."

"They can call us whatever the fuck they want as long as they don't know the truth. I said we're giving the nickels away - I didn't say we're not taking something back for them. You remember when me and Michelle were together?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't shut up about it."

Charlie gave him a look out of the corner of his eye that said 'don't piss me off'. After it had been quiet long enough for Cody to get the message, he went on. "I wasn't the only one talking about us. Her big brother, asshole Alex, was always giving us a ration of crap. Every time he came around it was 'don't they look soooo cute together,' or, 'quick, take a picture before the cuppie dolls move'. The nickels are for him."

"And what's he giving us?"

"An equal amount of quarters out of the big jar he keeps hidden on the floor of his closet. The dumb fuck made the mistake of bragging about leaving his bedroom window unlocked so he could sneak in and out whenever he wanted to. Now that the family's out of town for the week we're going to use his own trick against him."

They walked together without saying anything for the next several minutes. Cody was running through the plan step by step, looking for the slightest flaw. Charlie was wondering how many quarters a sock full of nickels would be worth.

"See those power lines?" Charlie finally said, pointing up ahead. The wires ran along a wide easement near the top of the hill they were climbing.

"Yeah. What about them?"

"We're going to follow them. Once we start don't say anything until we get to Michelle's house. Someone might be sitting out in their back yard smoking a stogie or something and we don't want to get caught trespassing."

Weeds had grown chest high across the easement and followed the lines into the darkness beyond. "No problem. Talking's going to be the last thing on mind if we've got to wade through all that crap. The snakes'll be getting all my attention."

As soon as they reached the power lines they left the sidewalk and started making their way towards the back of Michelle's house. It didn't take long for Cody to regret his thirst for adventure. The weeds were too damn high and the darkness too damn black. Every noise was a snake, and every silence was a noise waiting to happen. No one in the movies ever did it this way, he thought, sweating from the effort and fear. Next time he was going to insist on a few more details ahead of time.

Half an hour later Charlie stopped. "We're here" he whispered. "Want to come inside?"

"Hell no. What if they come home early?"

"Don't know. I bet we'll make it back up to the road a hell of a lot faster than it took us to get down here though." With that he was up and over the fence, barely making a sound as he went. Left alone in the darkness with only the mosquitoes and unseen snakes to comfort him, Cody started to feel better. At least he'd have a head start if anyone came home early.

Charlie wasn't worried about anyone coming home early. Things like that only happened to people who were too lazy to put together a good plan. He ran over to the window, pushed up on it, and smiled as it slid open without the slightest squeak thanks to the constant oiling it received. 'Way to go Alex', he said, climbing inside. 'I owe you one. Too bad you owe me a hundred.'

The house was as silent as an empty house was supposed to be. He pulled out a penlight and lit up the path between the window and closet. The floor

was covered with the usual piles of dirty clothes you'd expect to find in any teenager's room along with several things you'd never expect to find, like an old, dried-up cheese up sandwich, a couple of partially buried skin magazines and the condoms (both new and used) that went with them, and a glass lying on its side with a trail of green fuzz marking the path its contents had taken. Taking it all in, Charlie quickly decided to leave his shoes on. There was no way he was going to walk through all that shit just to keep from tracking some dirt into the house. Judging from the look of things Alex didn't notice much, especially when it came to dirt.

He crossed the room in three long steps and knelt down in front of the closet. The jar was there, half-hidden behind some old newspapers that hadn't made it to the trash. "Ahh, the sweet sight of money" he mumbled under his breath. Carefully pulling it out from behind the papers, he carried it over to the bed and dumped it out. The pile of change was loaded with quarters, enough to make the swap as easy as trading handful for handful. He started stuffing them into an empty sock. Every now and then a dime would be scooped up too but he didn't bother to pick them out. The trade was going to be in his favor even with them taking up some of the space. When the sock full of quarters weighed about as much as the one with the nickels in it he poured the nickels back into the jar along with the rest of the coins left on the bed and put it back in the closet, making sure it was half-hidden again. On the way out he stopped at the window just long enough to give Alex a silent one-fingered salute.

"Everything go alright?" Cody whispered when Charlie landed in a crouch beside him on the safe side of the fence.

"Sure. It went just as planned. Remember, don't - "

"I know, I know. Don't let them know they've been robbed and don't get greedy."

"You're learning. What do you say we go celebrate?"

"Don't you want to count the money first?"

"They'll be plenty of time for that later." He paused to consider their choices. "I'm feeling kind of thirsty. How about you?"

"Yeah. I've been sweating like a pig out here."

"Good. Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

'Oh oh,' Cody thought, 'it sounds like we're going to have another adventure.'

Their next stop turned out to be the back lot of a beer and wine distributor where a row of loaded trucks had been parked for the next day's deliveries. A chain-link fence topped with barbed wire surrounded it and served as a warning to any would-be thieves that this wouldn't be an easy target.

"It's a bluff," Charlie said, nodding toward the fence. They were standing in a drainage ditch that ran behind all of the buildings on this side of the industrial park, safely hidden from view.

"What makes you so sure?"

"I listen. One of my sister's old boyfriends used to work here loading the trucks. He told her he was surprised no one ever tried to break in since there wasn't much keeping them out - no guards, no dogs, no alarms - just the fence and electric gate. As soon as he said it I filed it away for future use. Well, the future's here." He left the ditch and walked along the fence until he came to a spot where it stopped at the back corner of the building. From there he went straight up. Instead of trying to cross the lines of barbed wire arcing off in a 45 degree angle from the top of the fence though, he grabbed the edge of the roof and pulled himself up onto it. "Come on," he said in a low voice, then ran across the roof to where the closest truck had been backed against the loading dock. Cody was still watching from outside the fence as he jumped down onto the top of the truck and made his way off of it to the ground. Seeing how easy it was, Cody quickly took the same path.

"Good man," Charlie said as soon as they were together again. "I knew you had the balls to do it."

"Yeah I'm a regular mafia man. What's next?"

"Next, we work up a little sweat." He pulled a small hacksaw out of his backpack and went around to the rear of the truck where a thick, long-necked padlock was being used to keep the doors locked. "The trick," he said as he started to saw through the bar at a sharp angle, "is to make this look natural. After we take a case of something, we'll glue the lock back together so when it falls apart the driver will only see what looks like a natural break. That's why we're only taking the one case too. They'll chalk that up as a normal loading mistake."

Cody was impressed. People Charlie's age usually didn't put that much thought into their crimes.

It took a few minutes to saw all the way through the bar but once that was done there was nothing standing between them and a trailer full of liquor.

"What'll it be," Charlie asked, climbing up into the trailer, "beer, wine, or the hard stuff?"

"Not beer for sure. It tastes like piss and stinks worse. The hard stuff's out too. Nothing to mix it with. Let's go with the wine."

"Wine it is then," Charlie said. He found a case, handed it down to Cody, and then climbed back out. A few dabs of glue later and the lock was back in place, appearing to do what it was supposed to do. They carried the case to the front of the truck where the climbing was easier and worked their way up to the roof and over to the fence. Getting from there to the ground took a little more time, with Charlie handing the bottles down to Cody one at a time. They made it without breaking a single bottle though. It was a short jog from there to the ditch and as soon as they reached it they sat down to catch their breath and celebrate. They had what they needed to throw a good party too. Charlie popped open a bottle (he had a corkscrew in the

backpack of course), handed it to Cody, and then opened another one for himself. "Score two for the criminals, eh?"

"Nothing but net so far," Cody agreed, hoping they hadn't sat down on an anthill. He swallowed another mouthful and listened to the other clichés that began running through his head. 'Three strikes you're out' seemed to repeat itself quite a bit. The more he heard it, the more worried he became. If his mom ever found out what they'd just done she'd yell at him until he was deaf and then call the police to make sure he got the point. Jail would be pretty tough too. He'd get the shit kicked out of him in there. He was a thinker, not a fighter. Right now he was beginning to think he'd been an idiot. He didn't belong in Charlie's world any more than Charlie belonged in the civilized world.

"What's the matter," Charlie asked, seeing how quiet he'd become. "Not enough wine in your bottle?"

"The wine's fine," he said, even though he hated it. He couldn't stand the slightest taste of alcohol but there were some things you never admitted. "I was just wondering if we're sitting on any anthills." There was some truth to that too. It was one of the thoughts competing with 'three strikes you're out' for his attention.

"Drink enough and you won't even feel them." They were quiet again until Charlie stood up and stretched a few minutes later. "I guess it's time we got going. Let's stash the case over there," he said, pointing to some woods on the other side of the ditch. "We'll save it for our next victory celebration."

Cody knew he shouldn't ask but couldn't stop himself. "You've got something else planned?"

"Of course. It's set for next Saturday. You're invited too."

"Do I want to be?"

"Sure. It could make you a rich man."

"Or a poor convict. What are we going after this time?"

"Don't know yet. We'll figure that out when we get there."

"Get where?"

"You'll see."

It wasn't much of an answer, but Cody decided not to dig any deeper. The details only would have given him something else to worry about. They buried the case under a pile of dead branches and headed home, cockiness walking side by side with fear.

Saturday came too fast. Cody was still worrying about what they'd already done when he found himself planning to get in even more trouble with Charlie. This time they were going to share it with someone else Charlie had brought along, a guy who would probably love the chance to grab his share judging by past performance. Cody didn't know him by name but had seen him being taken to the Principal's office plenty of times.

"This is Bugs," Charlie said.

"Bugs? How'd you get a name like that?"

"Easy," Bugs said, breaking into a mischievous grin. "I bug the hell out of people."

"You sure must do a lot of it at school. They're always dragging you down to the office."

"Yeah, they like me. I give them something to talk about. If it wasn't for me they'd be bored as hell."

Cody didn't like the sound of that. "We're not going to be giving anyone anything to talk about tonight. That's part of the rules. Right Charlie?"

"Right. The only kind of trouble we're getting in to is the kind no one knows about. This is going to be a whole new experience for you Bugs. Think you can you handle it?"

"Sure. I get enough attention on my own time. So what are we stealing? Coins, cash, cars?"

"Don't know yet. That's why I brought you in on this. We need a third pair of eyes." Charlie knew they weren't going to let it go at that so he went on to explain his latest plan.

As usual, an idle conversation had been all he needed for inspiration. This time it was a nurse's aide at his grandmother's nursing home who provided the details. She didn't like having to work harder at the nursing home on weekends for the same amount of money she got just to follow a homebound woman around during the week. The homebound patient, a woman named Winters, had a moderate case of Alzheimer's and could do everything for herself except remember where she was now and then. She even gave out tips at the end of the week, something none of the patients in the nursing home ever did. When one of the other nurses asked why she didn't just work for Winters on the weekends too she told them the family kept her with them on the weekends.

"This is the weekend and no one's home," Charlie finished. "What more could we ask for."

"A key," Cody said.

"Got one. The old lady keeps it buried in her garden just in case she accidentally locks herself out."

"And I suppose you know exactly where to start digging to get it out?"

"Sure do. The nurse's aide made fun of her because she half-buried a doorknob on top of it to remember where it was. Is this going to be easy or what?"

"Getting in's always easy," Bugs said. "Making it out with something worth stealing's a little harder. What the hell's some old lady going to have that we want?"

"Money for starters. If she's got enough to tip an aide on top of what they're already paying her then she's got enough for us. I brought you to help find out what else she's got that we might be interested in."

Bugs nodded and didn't ask any more questions. Money was always worth stealing.

Cody wasn't so sure. "I thought we were never supposed to let the victims know they were victims," he said. "She's going to know she's been robbed."

Charlie smiled. "She doesn't know what she knows. Even if she realizes she's been robbed and tells people no one's going to believe her. They'll just pat her on the head and tell her she must have forgotten where she put the stuff. That's what people with Alzheimer's do - forget things."

He turned around and started heading toward Mrs. Winter's house, sure that they'd follow him now without asking any more questions. And they did. The house turned out to be a perfect target. Built on the corner of a barely-used street in a barely-lit neighborhood, its yard was framed by a waist-high hedge out front and a head-high hedge on the other three sides. The hedge was thick enough to give them some cover without being too thick to squeeze through. As soon as they reached the other side they dropped to their knees and split up, crawling through the flower beds in search of the telltale doorknob. It didn't take long to find it and once they did they snuck into the house as fast as they could.

"That worked out pretty good," Charlie said, congratulating himself in case they forgot to. He locked the front door behind them and then unlocked the back door so they could make a quick exit if someone came to check on the house. A short sidetrip also put the key back where they'd found it so no one would know it had been used. With their escape route secured, they divided up the rooms and began searching. Cody took the kitchen with all its cabinets and cookie jars, Bugs took the dining room where the hutch and sideboard had plenty of drawers that needed going through, and Charlie took the two bedrooms and their overstuffed closets. Charlie figured he was the odds-on favorite to find something, probably in an old shoebox in one of the closets, but there was no telling what the old lady might have taped under a

drawer in the dining room or packed inside a fake can in the back of the refrigerator. For all they knew she might be crazy enough to leave her gold jewelry out in plain sight so she'd always remember she had it.

It didn't take long to figure out she wasn't that far gone. None of the obvious places produced any sudden wealth. The closets had clothes in them, the shoeboxes shoes, and the jewelry box - buttons. There was no cash stuffed between the mattresses, taped in an envelope under a drawer, or buried in a safe at the bottom of the hamper.

Bug's patience was the first to run out. When it dawned on him that there weren't going to be any easy pickings, he stared at the glass door in the hutch and the delicate pieces of china behind it. They weren't worth anything to him because there was no way he could turn them into money. They'd be worth a fortune to the old lady though. She'd have a heart attack if someone broke them, he thought, smiling to himself. And it would serve her right for wasting his time. He slid his hands behind the hutch and pulled hard, sending it crashing to the floor. The sudden explosion of glass brought Charlie and Cody running into the dining room.

"What the hell happened?" Charlie said as soon as he saw the fallen hutch.

Bugs shrugged. "It fell."

"Fell my ass." He took a step toward it thinking he'd try to stand it back up but stopped when he heard the fragments of glass crunching beneath his feet. "Damn it. You think she's not going to notice this?"

"Who the fuck cares? Let's get the hell out of here." He headed for the back door, walking as fast he could without breaking into a run.

"Lot of help he turned out to be," Cody muttered under his breath, following him. Charlie agreed but didn't say anything. His mind was already racing ahead to the new plans that had to be made.

They kept walking until they were well beyond what any passing policeman would consider the range of suspicion. A bus stop bench gave them an innocent place to stop and get their story straight.

"I don't see how we've got anything to worry about," Bugs said, giving it as little thought as he gave most things. "We were wearing gloves so there's no way they can find out it was us."

"What if the cops tell you I admitted we did it?" Charlie asked.

"I'd say we didn't. Then I'd call a few friends and we'd come over and beat the shit out of you."

"Good. We don't have to worry about you caving in then. Cody?"

"Lying sounds good to me. We were at the mall until about fifteen minutes ago and just walked home afterwards."

"What'd we buy?"

"Nothing. We just hung out."

"What stores did we go in?"

"None. We figured we'd just get hassled for shoplifting since Bugs was with us."

"Hey!" Bugs objected. "That ain't right."

"Sure it is," Charlie said. "Keeps the story simple and believable. Anyone who knows you knows you're trouble, right?"

"Well...yeah." He gave it a second thought. "Okay, I guess it won't hurt my rep any."

"Course not. That's it then. Let's see what happens tomorrow."

Sunday's were made for recovery and this one proved no different. Cody started it out flipping from station to station, hoping not to hear anything about their break-in on the news, and gradually lengthened the time between flips to a span that could accommodate a few songs. Each time the news ended without mentioning him he felt a little bit better. Not much, but a little. By the time night rolled the sense of relief was strong enough to let him get

a few hours of sleep. That was a few more hours than he would've gotten if he'd remembered Mrs. Winters wasn't due back home until Monday.

When she and the aide walked into the house Monday morning a lot of things happened fast and there wasn't a good thing in the bunch.

She saw the hutch first and just stared at it, not being able to make any sense out of what she saw. Slowly, she bent down to lift it up.

"Don't touch anything," her aide said, quickly grabbing her by the arm and pulling her back up. "The police will want to check everything for fingerprints."

"Fingerprints?" she repeated in a daze.

"Yes Ma'am. They'll need them to find out who did this." She steered her over to the couch and sat her down. "You just sit right here while I go call the police. They'll take care of this mess."

"Alright," she mumbled, her eyes still frozen on the hutch. The broken cups and plates had been gifts, each one carrying a memory of the smiling face of its giver. For most of her friends that was the only memory she had left. She didn't cry as she looked at the pile of rubbish her memories had become, it would have taken too much energy. She just kept staring at it, feeling nothing more than a strange lightheadedness. Her aide had gone to the kitchen to call the police so she couldn't see the signs of shock setting in. Mrs. Winters sat there, alone and numb, gently drifting into a fog where all thinking stopped. Each breath came slower and slower and mattered less and less. In the end there was no reason left. She died in silence, wanting no more.

When her aide finally came back into the room and saw her slumped over on the sofa, she knew right away what had happened. Years spent working in a nursing had made it a familiar sight. She went back into the kitchen and called for an ambulance, telling them there was no need to hurry.

For Cody, Charlie, and Bugs, burglary had become murder.

No one knew they were the guilty ones yet, not even them, so that day was just like any other day at school with Bugs trying to get noticed as often as he could, Cody trying to never get noticed, and Charlie noticing everything. By the time supper was over Cody was even feeling good enough to volunteer to do the dishes.

"I won't turn down an offer like that," she said, accepting it with a smile. "What's the occasion?"

"Nothing special. I just feel like helping out."

Those words coming from Jason would have set off alarm bells so loud you'd need concrete earmuffs to shut them out, but coming from Cody they sounded reasonable. Every now and then he did help out without expecting a new car in return. She went into the den to watch the news, leaving him with the dishes.

As he stood at the sink he listened to the TV too, more out of boredom than interest. One of the stories suddenly put an end to that. Some old lady had come home and died when she found out her house had been broken into. Crimes like that were almost always the fault of some chronic loser who'd have to have twenty birthdays to match wits with a ten year old. He knew right away that this time it was going to be different though. He was the loser and his wits were in question.

He told himself to stay calm and act like nothing had happened. No one could accuse him of anything as long as Charlie and Bugs kept their mouths shut. They could probably get away with this even if Bugs did say something. Everyone knew he liked to brag about being the baddest guy around. They'd just brush it off as more of his big mouth. Charlie had to keep quiet though, everyone believed him.

With that in mind he finished the dishes as fast as he could and went upstairs to call him. Charlie's mom answered the phone. "Hi. Is Charlie there?" he asked, trying to sound bored.

"Is that you Cody?"

"Yeah."

"Don't call here anymore." She hung up before he could say anything else.

He held the silent receiver in his hand and stared at it. The only word that came to mind was 'damn'. It came over and over again, hammering at him. Finally, after several minutes, it stopped. In its place came two other words - I'm screwed. Those words weren't any more comforting than the first one so he turned on the radio to drown them out. When that didn't do the trick he sat down at the computer and started playing one of his favorite games. A good game could turn hours into minutes and he chose one of the best. Three hours later it was bedtime and he hadn't thought about getting arrested more than once or twice, per minute. The fact that he was still safely at home surprised him. If Charlie had pointed the finger at him - and his mom had made it pretty clear he had - then the police should have been knocking on his door a long time ago. What could be taking them so long? He called downstairs to say goodnight and then laid down on his bed to wait. While he was lying there it gradually occurred to him that Charlie's mom could have been mad at him for something else him and Charlie had done. Stealing the cigarettes for instance. She must really like smoking if that's all it was, he thought, drifting off to sleep.

It was still dark outside when he woke up. His mom was talking to someone downstairs. Then she was yelling at him to come down. 'Now' was the loudest word he heard.

'Oh shit', he thought, 'this is it'. And he was right. There were two policemen standing in the doorway and another one out in the driveway with his hand on his holster. 'What's going on?' he asked, smelling his own sudden sweat.

"These men say you're in a hell of a lot of trouble. What do you have to say about that?"

"Could you step outside for a minute son?" the oldest of the two cops said. It was clear he expected yes for an answer.

"What did I do?" Cody asked.

"Step outside."

Cody did as he was told.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

He did as he was told again and felt the handcuffs tighten around his wrists.

"You're being placed under arrest. It would be a good idea if you didn't say anything right now. Ma'am, we'll be taking him down to the county jail for processing. You should probably get in touch with a lawyer as soon as you can. He's going to need one."

Cody felt a hand on his arm pull him towards one of the patrol cars and he let himself be led to it. 'Shit,' he thought, forgetting his fear of jail for a second, 'I should have put on my damn shoes before I came downstairs'.

That same curse came out a lot stronger when they reached the assessment center and he had to walk across its gravel parking lot. The policeman dragging him along by the arm didn't slow down to let him brace himself for the sharp stone edges each step landed on either - that wouldn't have been half as much fun. If anything he forced him to walk faster. When they reached the edge of the lot he turned to his partner and smiled.

"Oh man, I forgot to check under the back seat to make sure this kid didn't hide any contraband there. Guess we'll just have to go back and do it now. Got to follow procedures, you know." With that he spun Cody around and headed back to the car, pleased with the pain he was inflicting. 'The guilty deserve to be punished,' he thought, 'so why not by me?' He could have happily spent all night out there marching him around the lot like that and he'd have done it too if he could have gotten away with it. Someone would probably notice that though and start whining at him about being too rough

again. He didn't feel like dealing with that kind of noise right now so he fought back the urge to jog a few laps and took Cody into the building.

Cody's eyes were as red as his feet by then but there were no tears in them. That was the important thing. Even he knew crying wasn't an emotion that carried a lot of weight in jail. The cool touch of the tile floor beneath his feet almost brought tears of relief though.

The assessment center was just a wing off of the main jail that acted as a sorting pen, with juveniles steered toward vans that would take them to a separate detention center and adults sent to cells to wait for further sorting. Because the charge in Cody's case was murder, he got a cell. It wasn't a cell he could call his own either. Every cell had at least three people in it and he was number four in the one they put him in. There was a mattress on the floor to sleep on but it wasn't going to serve its purpose. His eyes wandered up and down the corridor all night, going from the man at the desk at one end who'd taken his belt and given him a pair of floppy sandals in return, to the heavy steel door of the lockdown cell at the other. The view wasn't very interesting but it kept him from having to talk to his cellmates. There was no way of telling what might set one of them off and he didn't feel like experimenting. They were content to let him mind his own business too, it being too late in the evening to get upset over anything less than a really good insult.

Morning came early, bringing nothing with it. The bullying he'd expected didn't rise with the sun to greet him. It turned out that even criminals needed to get their morning cup of coffee before they could get down to being bad. They marched to the cafeteria in slow motion, sandals flopping against the tile in muted slaps. Once there they had to listen to a recorded message telling them to keep their mouths shut and their hands to themselves before they could go in. It didn't say what would happen if either rule was broken and Cody didn't ask. He figured it wouldn't take long for someone in a crowd like this to provide an example.

The meal itself was more bland than bad - two slices of pre-buttered toast, a bowl of oatmeal, a plastic cup of orange juice, and a pint-sized carton of milk. There were no bugs or spit in it as far as he could tell. After breakfast they were taken back to their cells to wait for lunch. All in all, his first day in jail turned out to be extremely boring, which was just how he wanted it to be. Excitement would mean someone got hurt, probably him.

On the afternoon of his second day he finally got some attention. The guards took him out of his cell and brought downstairs to meet Franklin Hayes, a man who looked a lot like the overstuffed briefcase he was thumping his way through. Hayes caught Cody's quick look of disapproval and smiled. "Don't worry, I might look fat and stupid but I'm really only fat. That makes you lucky because I'm your lawyer." He laid a folder out on the table and put the briefcase aside. "You see this," he said, tapping the folder with his index finger. "It's your future. The information in it is all we've got when we go in for the Hearing to try to get you charged as a juvenile instead of an adult. What difference does that make I ask, since this is all new to you? Juveniles get one to two years in a youth program that'll try to cure them - adults get a minimum of 25 years in a prison that'll kick the shit out of them. Being a juvenile is a good thing, okay?"

Cody shook his head yes.

"I hope you're the talkative type because this folder's looking mighty thin right now. According to the police, you and a guy called Bugs broke into some old lady's house, tore the hell out of it, and then bragged about it to one of your buddies the next day. That's what the judge is going to hear tomorrow. We've got to make sure he hears more than that if we're going to get you charged as a juvenile. So what else can we tell him?"

"That it wasn't my idea."

"Of course not. We've got to prove it though. Bugs is the one with the bad record, which makes it easy to point the finger at him. They'll point it

right back at you though and say that that same record proves he always does his damage on the spur of the moment. Your record, on the other hand, is clean as a whistle, which means you're the planning type who doesn't get caught. How do we prove to them that you weren't the instigator?"

"We tell them the truth. Charlie was behind the whole thing."

"Charlie? The kid who turned you in?"

"Yeah. It was his idea."

Hayes sat back in his chair and wrapped his thoughts around that line of defense, mentally weighing it against the facts in the folder. Something had been bothering him about the case before and now it bothered him even more. "This kid Charlie, you know him pretty well?"

"I thought I did. Shows you how smart I am, huh?"

"And Bugs? You known him a long time?"

"No. Charlie brought him along to help us search the house. I'd seen him at school before but we'd never said anything to each other before that."

Hayes drummed his fingers on the folder, looking at Cody without saying anything. After a couple of minutes he finally made up his mind. "Okay, we'll play it that way. You two didn't seem like the type who'd pair up together, not without some help anyway, and a middleman would account for that. You're saying Charlie put the three of you together?"

"Yeah, it was him alright."

"Can we prove it?"

"He's the one who knew where the key was hidden. He told us a nurse's aide was talking about it when he was visiting his grandmother at the nursing home."

"He's already covered that base. Said he told you about the key a couple of weeks ago when he was telling you how crazy the patients there were. He didn't think you'd actually use it. What else have we got?"

"Bugs. He'll back me up."

"He can't. It'll just look like the two of you are trying to get even with Charlie for telling on you. Besides, we don't really want him on our side. We need to get as far away from his record as we can. Got anything else?"

Cody thought about it. There wasn't much more. Not for this crime anyway. He shook his head no.

"Look, just tell me everything you can think of that Charlie's ever done wrong. Don't worry about how big or small it was. I'll know which story to use." Cody took a deep breath and began. During the next half hour he told Hayes everything he could think of, starting with big things like the brewery break-in and ending with little things like the cigarette trick. When he was through there were another couple of pages of notes ready for the folder.

"Good enough," Hayes said, sticking the folder back into his briefcase.

"Feeling lucky?"

Cody glanced around the concrete-walled room. "Not really."

"Well you better be. If we're going to get you tried as a juvenile we're going to have to go for broke and trade your confession for some pity. That's my advice anyway. We won't confess if you don't want to."

"You think pity will really help?"

"It never hurts. Being a victim's almost as good as being innocent. I'll bet you never thought seeing your father and brother get killed would be a good thing, did you?"

"It wasn't."

"No, not for them I suppose, but it might turn out to be the clincher for you. If we go this route I'm going to have to say some pretty insulting things about you too. Think you can handle it?"

"Yeah, if I have to."

"There's always a choice."

"Not always a good one."

"Right. So are we confessing then?"

"I guess so."

"Don't guess - be sure."

"Okay, I'll confess."

"To everything?"

"What do you mean everything?"

"The only way out of this is by telling the whole truth. That means the judge has to get an earful of everything you and Charlie have ever done wrong. Understand?"

"Yeah." He hung his head in defeat. "Do you think my mom will be at the Hearing?"

"God I hope not. I talked to her yesterday. The last thing we want is her speaking up. She's so pissed off she'd offer to drive you to prison herself."

Kathy was still ready to do the driving when she showed up at the Hearing the next day and took a seat on the prosecutor's side of the room. Given the chance she probably would have volunteered for his job too. Fortunately for Cody he could avoid her glare by shifting his eyes back and forth between Hayes and the judge. That kept him busy until Charlie took the stand. From then on he kept his eyes focused squarely on his former friend.

After the prosecutor took him step by step through the events leading up to his phone call to the police it was Hayes' chance to get a few words in.

"Judging from your story, it sounds like you did everything right Charlie. Very commendable. I am curious about a couple of things though. When you first told Cody and Bugs about this crazy old lady who kept her keys under a rock - they didn't jump right up and say 'let's break into her house' did they?"

"No sir."

"Did you expect them to?"

"No sir."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't have been right."

"Are you familiar with Bugs history of doing what's right?"

Charlie smiled a little. "Yes sir."

"It's a pretty short history, isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, maybe he had other adventures on his mind that day and just didn't think of it at the time. What about Cody? Are you familiar with his history of doing what's right?"

"Yes sir."

"Pretty long one?"

"Not as long as some people think sir."

"So he's had his little adventures too, eh? Only he was smart enough up until now not to get caught. Is that it?"

"Yes sir."

"But he didn't jump up and say let's go break into her house either."

"That's right sir."

"So you gave two people that you knew had a history of little adventures some information that would let them have a big one?"

"I didn't think they'd use it that way sir."

"Of course not. It wouldn't be right, as you said before. You have a pretty good reputation Charlie. Do you think that's why they didn't invite you along when they finally got the idea to break into her house?"

"Quite possibly sir."

"You wouldn't have gone along with it?"

"No sir."

"Definitely?"

"Yes sir."

"And they knew you'd try to stop them?"

"Yes sir."

"Without a doubt?"

"Yes sir."

"Even if you had to tell someone to stop it from happening?"

"Yes sir."

"And they knew you'd do it too, because people who know you know you stick up for what's right. True?"

"Yes sir."

"What happened to your reputation later on?"

"Sir?"

"They told you they broke into her house didn't they?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, they must not have thought you were the same Charlie who'd always stick up for what's right when they did. That would have been as stupid as walking into the police station and bragging about it on a bullhorn. So what did they know about Charlie that we don't know?"

"I don't know sir."

"Let's see if we can find out then. This Bugs character, he's known for causing a lot of trouble around school, right?"

"Yes."

"He's a little out there though, isn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's not what you'd call a natural born leader, is he? When he gets taken to the office he gets taken there alone because no one does the kinds of crazy things he does."

"That's right."

"And Cody. Look at him. I've only known him two days and I already know he was so scared of his own mother that he made up lies in confession just to keep from getting yelled at. It wouldn't surprise me if he peed in his pants on the way to jail in the police car. Does he strike you as the leader type?"

Charlie gave that little smile again. "No sir."

"So that leaves us with a nutjob and a wimp. Where's our leader then, the one who put them together to pull off this break-in?"

"I don't know sir."

"You have to. You're the one they told."

Hayes paused to let that sink in. He could feel the fingers beginning to point. "Maybe Cody's version of this story will make more sense. The truth usually does."

The detective in charge of the crime scene took the stand next. Taking the prosecutor's lead, he described the room the way Mrs. Winters found it, trying to drill the shock of her shattered world into the jury's head. Once the prosecutor was satisfied that the jury was sufficiently upset, he let Hayes take his turn.

"It sounds like you spent a great deal of time going over the crime scene to make sure you didn't miss anything that would help you find out who the burglars were."

"I did."

"Did you find Cody's fingerprints on anything?"

"No."

"Did you find 'Bugs' fingerprints on anything?"

"No."

"Did any of Mrs. Winters neighbors tell you they saw Cody anywhere near her house?"

"No."

"Did they see Bugs?"

"No."

"Hmmm . . .no fingerprints . . . no witnesses at the scene . . . did you find any kind of hard evidence at all at the scene that pointed the finger at these two, and these two alone, who committed the crime?"

"We had Charles Hadley's testimony."

"But he wasn't there, was he?"

"No sir."

"How do you know that?"

"He wouldn't have called us if he'd been there."

"Why not? That call convinced you he wasn't guilty."

Hayes went back and sat down, dismissing the detective as he did. He didn't question any of the prosecution's other witnesses. The seeds of doubt had been planted deep enough.

When it came time for Cody to take the stand Hayes slid a yellow legal pad in front of him and tapped his finger on the single sentence there for emphasis -

'You're going to go to jail if you say Charlie's name when my hand's not touching my tie.'

It struck Cody as an odd warning, one he could have done without considering how nervous he already was.

"Now Cody," Hayes began, "the prosecutor claims you broke into Mrs. Winters house. Is he right?"

"Yes sir."

"He is?"

"Yes."

"You're confessing right now in front of everyone?"

"Yes sir."

"How come?"

"You told me they'd try me as an adult if I didn't tell the whole truth."

"Does that scare you?"

"Yes."

"You scare kind of easy, don't you?"

He hesitated, not wanting to admit something like that in front of everyone.

"Don't you?" Hayes repeated.

"Well, sometimes."

"Like when you were breaking into Mrs. Winters house?"

"Yeah."

"Can you think of anyone who'd say you've got the guts to lead your friends out on an adventure like that?"

"No."

"Then someone else must have done the leading, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Was it 'Bugs'?"

"No."

"If it wasn't 'Bugs' and it wasn't you - who was it?"

Cody watched Hayes' hands, waiting for them to touch his tie. The silence lengthened as Hayes kept his hands well clear of it. Cody could feel sweat beginning to seep through his shirt as he sat there forcing himself not to say Charlie's name.

"Well, we're waiting. Who was there with you on the night you broke into Mrs. Winters house?" There was a demanding edge in his tone.

For a second Cody almost said Charlie's name. The hand hadn't touched the tie yet though. When he looked over at Charlie, Charlie stared right back at him. "I can't say sir."

"You can't tell us?"

"No."

"Let me guess - you're afraid to, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll bet the person who was with you that night would be pretty mad at you if you said his name right now, wouldn't he?"

"He sure would."

"Well, we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"No."

"Is this the first time you've done something illegal with this person?"

"No."

"You've broken the law together before?"

"Yes."

"There's no record of it."

"We weren't caught."

"That must have taken some careful planning on your part."

"I didn't do the planning. I just went along with him."

"Who?"

The hand still didn't touch the tie. "Can't say."

"Can you tell us about some of these crimes? Keep in mind, anything you say will be treated as a confession."

"I can't get in any worse trouble than I'm already in. We broke into a beer place and someone else's house too."

"Your friend did the planning both times?"

"Yes."

"Tell us a little about those crimes. For instance, what made you do them?"

"We broke into the house because he was mad at his girlfriend's brother because he was always making fun of them. We went in through his bedroom window and took a bunch of quarters out of a jar he kept hidden in the closet."

"Both of you went in?"

"No, just him. I think he was afraid I'd screw it up since I hadn't done anything like that before."

"What about the beer place?"

"His sister dated a guy who worked there and let it slip out how easy it'd be to break in there because there were no alarms or guards. Just a fence surrounding the place. We went over the fence, sawed the lock off of a truck door, and stole a case."

"And you got away with it?"

"Yeah. There was a little one-paragraph story in the paper about it, but no one ever found out it was us."

"Your friend seems to be pretty clever."

"He's sharp."

"Sharper than you?"

"Oh yeah."

"Tell me, have you ever got away with anything that wasn't illegal but was slightly sneaky all the same?" Hayes finally touched his tie.

"Yeah, Charlie showed me how to steal cigarettes from his parents without getting caught."

"He never got caught?"

"No."

"How'd he manage that?"

"He'd take packs out of a carton, slit the bottom open, slip one out, and then glue the cellophane back on so no one would know they'd ever been opened."

"I'll bet he didn't wear gloves when he did that."

"No."

"So we might find a set of his fingerprints on some boxes right now if we went to the trouble to go get one."

"Probably."

"And you still won't tell us whose idea it was to break into Mrs. Winters house?"

The hand had moved away from the tie. "No."

"I don't have any more questions then." He knew the prosecutor would have plenty of them though. All of the fingers pointed at Charlie now.

Chapter 7: Mosquito Children

"Get off of me you fuckwad!" a voice screamed through the woods up ahead as a counselor led Cody towards his assigned group. "When I get up I'm going to kick your ass so hard you'll be pissing turds for a month!"

"Don't worry about that," the counselor said, "When someone loses their temper here the rest of the group holds him down on the ground until he's ready to talk about the problem instead of fighting it out. They get mad about it but at least no one gets hurt that way."

"Does it happen a lot?"

"Depends on where the group's at. They go through stages."

"Where's mine at?"

The counselor smiled. "Yours will be just fine after this canoe trip."

In case I never get around to finishing this book, here are the answers to your questions.

What's the meaning of life? Don't whine - we did choose to be born. We didn't choose the slot we wound up in but we did chose to take a chance and learn from life.

Why do bad things happen? It's a level playing field - god doesn't play favorites. You can pray for a safe pass all you want but he won't give you one. It would defeat the purpose of coming here.

So what good does it do for someone to come here and then be killed while they're still a kid? Probably none that time around. They can try again though - you get as many chances as you want. Stop thinking of death as the end of the game. It's only the end of an inning.