

MOON AWAY

by

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: *MOON AWAY*

Although there is no definitive answer as to when the young adult genre began, and works were written with a young audience in mind much earlier, it wasn't until the mid 20th century that this genre gained momentum and started to be taken seriously by writers, librarians, publishers, and others within the greater literary community. In its relatively short history, the young adult genre has evolved and grown, yet it still consistently draws upon the tradition set forth by its earliest writers.

In the early 1950s, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* helped pave the way for other groundbreaking works to follow. Although it was published with an adult audience in mind, this work caught the attention of adolescent readers before a category of fiction was devoted to this group. To this day, Salinger's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, remains a popular icon for teen angst, and many contemporary works continue to resemble this novel, where the protagonist is lonely, troubled, and seems to be dangerously close to suffering a nervous breakdown.

In the late 60s and early 70s, during a period of social, cultural, and political rebellion and a prolonged defiance of authority, books such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* emerged. These books broke the common conventions in literature geared toward adolescents and, like Salinger's novel, portrayed the darker side of teen life. Authors such as M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, and Judy Blume added to this body of work that is now considered to be the classics of YA literature. As Frances

FitzGerald notes, they created an inward-looking world set apart from adults where the teens suffer, usually because of wrongdoing by individual authority figures or society as a whole. They inspired a form that utilizes very minimal description of surrounding places or characters, and the teen characters use their own sort of language (6-7). These early authors and their works essentially became the models for all YA literature that has since followed.

Authors intending to write young adult literature must understand that while the genre shares many qualities with adult fiction, there are certain aspects that set it apart. Because many young adults choose to read adult literature that deals with mature themes, it is essential that YA authors respect this audience and realize that their place in life warrants a type of writing that speaks directly to them and the issues they either deal with or wonder about. K.L. Going states, “the intent of the teen novel isn’t to ‘write down’ to them, but rather to give them a body of literature that is uniquely their own” (13). The definition of YA literature is debatable and there will always be exceptions that challenge the boundaries of the field, but the works that fall into this genre do often share some general characteristics. Most YA critics, scholars, and historians agree that the primary audience is made up of people ages twelve to eighteen, the work is longer than that geared toward children and shorter than an adult piece, the pace is quick, the treatment of theme is fairly straightforward, and a teen protagonist and teen perspective is featured.

The treatment of theme in young adult literature tends to be less complex than that found in adult literature, but contemporary authors of the YA novel do not shy away from the difficult issues many teens have to face in today’s world. Difficult topics such as teen

parenthood, drug and alcohol addiction, suicide, and serious mental illness are dealt with on a regular basis. For instance, Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* features a protagonist that brings the warring racial sections of a town together, and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* portrays the struggle one teen goes through to deal with a friend's suicide and to eventually realize that he was molested by a relative. While teen problems continue to evolve and change with the times, FitzGerald concludes that the way teens solve these dilemmas has not, for the most part. Turning to art and nature continues to be popular, leaving town in some fashion is common, and finding love or a sense of companionship helps as well (9). The combination of writing about complex issues while also capturing the intensity of adolescence makes it difficult to avoid venturing into melodrama, but this is a challenge that must be conquered in order to write an effective piece of YA fiction.

While the young adult genre embodies numerous subgenres, the largest has always been contemporary realism. The vast majority of these stories have followed the same basic pattern. They are problem novels where the protagonist must attempt to overcome some sort of tragedy or traumatic experience. Marc Aronson describes a coming-of-age as the development portrayed by a character whose personality has been shaped by the smaller, more isolated worlds of school, family, and friends, but then moves into a larger world and begins to gain a new sense of identity (20). Young adult novels inherently take on a sense of wonder because the characters, in their process of coming-of-age, often grapple with new and exciting experiences that provide the spark needed to change and grow.

In a number of ways, characteristics of the YA novel intersect with that of the novella, a form that has been developed by some of the most accomplished and respected writers who have ever lived. It can be extremely useful, therefore, to refer to works such as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. These works, like YA novels, utilize concise language and a focused storyline, and they can be examined in order to better understand the elements that come together to make a quality work of fiction. In comparison with the short story, the novella's length allows for a longer cast of characters, more scenes, a more complex plot, and a story that can take place over longer stretches of time. While short stories portray a sudden illumination and novels usually take on longer narratives of growth and development, the novella has the opportunity to do either or a combination of both. In addition, chapters can be utilized as a means of controlling the pace and building a sense of anticipation.

The best works in both the YA and short novel genres are quality, timeless pieces of literature that are able to attract and speak to readers of all ages and walks of life. For my thesis, I drew on both of these literary traditions with the intentions of creating a work geared first and foremost toward a young adult audience, yet one with the potential to speak to adult readers as well.

I knew from the start that I wanted to create a YA novel within the realm of contemporary realism. I also believed the story I had in mind would be best told in the first person using a male narrator somewhere around the age of fourteen, so I consulted several recent and applicable YA novels. Works such as Sherman Alexie's *The*

Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, and David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* provided examples of the unique and varied narrative voices some modern-day authors have put forth.

Reminding myself of the intended audience during the writing and revising process proved to be both helpful and difficult. I did not want my desire to write with a particular audience in mind to stifle any of the ideas that came to me during the creative process and the writing of the initial draft. But later, during revision, one dilemma I faced as I once again considered audience was deciding on the ages of the main characters. I kept their ages at fourteen and fifteen for two main reasons. First, I consider the ideal audience for this work to be on the low end of the young adult spectrum, within the twelve to fifteen-year-old range, and readers at this age tend to want to read about characters their own age or slightly older. Secondly, I wanted the narrator to undergo significant growth and change throughout the course of the story, and the transition from middle to high school presents one of the first big leaps that young adults face. It can be both an exciting and frightening period of time when they are expected, to a certain extent, to stop acting childish and to begin to act like adults, and this scenario seemed to work well in terms of what I wanted to accomplish.

The basis of the story stemmed from my own experience coping with the death of two friends and classmates, one a car accident and the other a suicide. I had already dealt with loss on a number of occasions prior to these events, but losing friends my own age shook me in a way I had never before experienced. Death was no longer a far-off, abstract concept. It had become very real and present, and part of my grieving process

involved a serious consideration of my own mortality. As I continued to mourn these losses, I marveled at the profound impact they had on my view of the entire world and beyond. I was an adult when these tragedies occurred, but somewhere along the way I wondered how a young adult, whose life is already typically in a state of turmoil and confusion, would deal with the loss of not only a friend, but a best friend. And from there, I escalated the thought further and wondered how a young adult might respond if this death were a suicide witnessed in person.

The closest thing I could equate to this type of imagined situation is the feeling that the world has or is about to come to an end. My decision to set the story in the midst of the Y2K scare became a way for the narrator to project the recent tragedy of losing a friend and the array of emotions it stirred into this escalating (sometimes humorously so) fear some held onto that the world would be in dire circumstances come January 1st, 2000. Furthermore, using this event provided a background to the story that helped allow the narrator to arrive at the eventual realization that everything would be okay.

As I developed the story and its events, humor became an essential tool in a number of regards. I spent much of my childhood and adolescence living in a small town in northern Wisconsin, and because of my love for this type of locale, I felt comfortable poking gentle fun at the variety of wonders and limitations that are characteristic of it. I examined everything from the fun and unique business names to the creativity a small town forces upon its residents to invent their own entertainment. On the other hand, I also wanted to portray the dark side of towns where everyone knows (or thinks they know)

everyone else and where the long, frigid winters encourage the sort of heavy drinking and alcoholism that the entire state is known for.

The narrator uses humor as a means of distancing himself from the trauma of witnessing his best friend's suicide and dealing with a reality that is too awful to bear without some sort of buffer. In the process of telling the story, he demonstrates that humor can help recollect the past while shielding a victim from the immediacy of the pain involved. In addition, as the narrator deals with a variety of common situations within a high school setting that make him feel marginalized and trapped in a constant state of powerlessness, humor is used as a way to reassert a sense of authority and to maintain some sense of sanity. By the end, humor is still very much intertwined with the past trauma and tragedy, but it has also become a healing force.

Beyond utilizing humor as something essential to the characters within the story, I used it in consideration of the intended audience as well. Without humor and the comic moments that pop up throughout the novel, the loneliness, sadness, and heartache of the characters could potentially be too much for some readers to take in.

This project underwent several revisions, all of which took it in a slightly different direction. Initially, the narrator told the story in written form, all within a journal, but moving away from this setup allowed the story to be told more fluidly, without drawing attention to this type of contrived framework. This also helped with the overall organization. Revisions included more of the summer timeline at the start in order to get a feel for who the characters were before the trauma. These later drafts also included longer chunks of material at a time rather than switching rapidly between the summer and the

school year. The alterations were made in an effort to better display the development of the main characters.

One theme that began to emerge during the revision process is the notion of craziness or losing one's mind. Many of the characters at one point or another are considered to have lost their mind to a certain extent, either by their own accord or the opinion of others. I noticed moments of lucidity within some of these characters' words, thoughts, and actions, however, that encouraged me to further explore the notion of who, in this world, truly is "crazy."

An aspect that continued to evolve throughout the revision process was the astronomical bent, and along with it, notions of time and age. For the narrator, attempting to understand the pain of a friend driven to commit suicide and the reasons behind such a decision prove to be every bit as impossible as trying to comprehend the size and scope of the entire universe. But comparing, contrasting, and sometimes combining the extraordinary with the ordinary becomes a means of partial understanding and acceptance.

This young adult novel seeks to deal with the confusion, frustration, and excitement of adolescence while exploring the ways that death and loss can alter a teen's sense of identity and view of the world. My hope was to display the strength and resiliency of all teens who take a step toward maturity as they grapple with some of life's most difficult issues.

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TUMBLE DRYING INTO MANHOOD

SUMMER 1999

At the sound of the final bell of the year, our last day of middle school, Nutty, Milkers, and I ran out the doors, hopped on our bikes, and didn't stop until we hit the water. We rode right off the end of the dock and into the lake, bikes and all.

Washburn sits on the northern tip of Wisconsin, right on the shore of Lake Superior's Chequamegon Bay. It's cold enough mid-summer, but they say the water is only for fish and lunatics any other time of year.

We like to say it washes off the dust we collected sitting in class all year long. Plus, it's like the fountain of youth in a way. The second you hit the water, your walnuts hop right back into your stomach and your hotdog shrinks into a little cocktail wiener, tinier than it was the day you were born.

It's a fresh start to the best time of the year.

After we climbed out of the water, we sat on the bench to dry off. Nutty's body was speckled with tiny, light brown freckles, but the most noticeable ones stretched across his chest and stomach in the shape of the Big Dipper. His shaggy brown mop, full of waves and half-curls, dripped water into his eyes, so he shook his head back and forth, spraying us on purpose.

I couldn't retaliate with my buzz cut, but Milkers gave it a shot. When he realized that his hair was too short to do much damage, too, he inched closer to Nutty and shook his entire three hundred pounds like a dog drying itself.

Nutty pretended Milkern didn't get a drop on him, so Milkern sat back down and asked the same question he's tossed out at the start of every summer.

“So, what should we do?”

I've been told by more than one person that we live in our own little world. When out-of-towners visit, they wonder what we do for fun. Someone once asked me with a straight face if we get cable TV or the Internet way up here. Apparently the rest of the planet thinks we still sleep in caves and rub sticks together to cook our food.

Some people love being in the middle of absolutely nowhere. They'll buy a piece of land way back in the sticks and spend all their time getting even further away from civilization than Washburn already is. Between the hunters, fishers, four-wheelers, and snowmobilers, Washburn is packed full of people who would rather bump into Sasquatch than another human being.

The ones who aren't so happy living up here tend to say the same phrases over and over.

I'm bored.

There's nothing to do.

I want to get out of here.

Nutty was one of the few who never complained about boredom. He was full of crazy ideas.

He gave us a grin and said, “I've been thinking we ought to have a little competition this summer.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I was thinking we could have a decathlon or something like that. Except we could make up some wild events. None of us have to work weekends, right?”

“Nah,” Milkers said. “Since I’m my own boss, I’ve decided to give myself the weekends off.”

He started his own lawn-mowing business the previous summer and had plenty of customers lined up.

Nutty landed a part-time job bussing tables at Fishy Lips Bar and Grill.

“I’m good to go,” I said.

My folks had been on my case, telling me it’s never too soon to start saving, and since Milkers and Nutty both planned to work, I figured it would be a good way to stay busy during the week. I got my job by responding to an ad put in the paper by Myra Zahorski. She planned to move out of the area and wanted to find someone to check in on her dad, Sal, a couple times a week to take care of little jobs or errands. She mostly wanted to find someone to stop in and chat so he didn’t get too lonely. Easy enough, I figured.

“Okay, good deal.” Nutty said. “Your homework for tonight is to think up some events for our little summer competition. I’ve got a couple ideas brewing already. Either of you have a baseball bat and some old golf balls?”

We headed to my place to grab supplies for a home-run derby. Luckily, Dad had some fluorescent orange and yellow balls sitting out in the garage. It took us a lot longer to lose those in the knee-high weeds behind the outfield fence.

The golf balls sailed off the bat like miniature comets. I was too weak to hit an actual baseball out of the field, so it was the first time I'd ever hit a home run. After smashing a handful out of the park, I felt confident enough to pull a Babe Ruth and call my shot. I whiffed it big time, but the derby was a success anyhow. I wondered if the pros ever hit golf balls to boost their confidence when they're in a slump.

"Let's get together tomorrow so I can hear what you geniuses dreamed up," Nutty said when we parted ways.

Milkers and I live on the same block, so on the way home we tossed a few ideas around. Neither one of us had a clue how much this little summer competition would change our lives.

We met up that next night, and right off the bat Nutty asked if we came up with any bright ideas. Before I could open my mouth, he butted in.

"First, a few ground rules," Nutty said. "This isn't a decathlon. We're only having nine events. That way we all get to come up with three. The winner of the most events will be crowned champion of Moon Wars, named in honor of the finale. In case of a tie, we'll come up with a sudden death event. The losers will treat the champ to an all-you-can-eat dinner at Frank's Pizza Palace. Up to the challenge?"

"Piece o' cake," Milkers said, licking his chops. He was either dreaming of the pizza or the cake he had just mentioned.

"I don't know if I can front the bill if Milkers wins," I said.

"Kiss it," he replied.

All three of us knew there was more at stake than some pizza party. Sure, we were doing it to have some fun, but when there's a bet on the line, things get more serious in a hurry.

“So, how about those bright ideas of yours?” Nutty asked, and this time he waited for a response.

My brainstorming hadn't produced a whole lot of thunder, so I was happy to hear Milkens speak up.

“Yeah, I came up with a good one,” Milkens said. “It's something I've always wanted to do. Let's head over to Ed's Laundromat where I'll tumble dry right into victory lane. I'll tell you the rules on the way.”

We took off on our bikes from Ryder Park, our usual meeting spot. On our way to Ed's, Milkens explained that we would each take a turn spinning in a dryer to see how long we could last before saying “uncle.” Hurling during or after the event would result in disqualification. Nutty asked Milkens if he was sure he'd be able to fit, but he assured us that the industrial sized dryers would have plenty of room.

I thought the choice of event was a low blow, but it made me want to win that much more. A couple years ago, Milkens convinced me to ride on the Octopus at Pioneer Days, the county fair. I knew I had a weak stomach when it came to that kind of stuff, so up until then, I'd just watch year after year as everyone else had the time of their lives. Eventually, with a few well-placed insults, Milkens talked me into giving it a shot.

As we stood in line and slowly moved toward the gate, I thought I wouldn't even make it onto the ride before throwing up the nachos I had just inhaled. We sat down and

the sweatiest carney worker I've ever seen pulled the safety bar down over us. This guy's b.o. only made matters worse. It wasn't long before that ride shut down for cleaning. I lasted a minute, max. The sweaty guy got in my face and yelled that I wasn't allowed on his ride ever again. That's what Milkens told me later, at least. I was too busy dodging the sweat bullets that shot off his tank top.

Ever since that day, I've avoided carnival rides and anything that resembles them. I'm sure Milkens thought I'd either wimp out of his laundry event or puke during it. Maybe it was his way of getting back at me. I do remember seeing some of my partially digested nachos stuck to his shirt after the ride.

When we got to Ed's, we noticed a lady folding her clothes. It looked like Luke Donnelly's mom, but we couldn't tell, so we headed over to the Pump n' Munch, our favorite gas station, to grab some Frosties. As always, Milkens sucked his down too fast and complained about a brain freeze.

We rode past the Laundromat again, and the coast was clear. We felt pretty sure that no one else would come in the rest of the night but decided it would be best to have a lookout. The order was decided by a round robin rock, paper, scissor tourney. Nutty was first, followed by Milkens, and I got to bring up the rear.

Milkens pulled a stopwatch from his pocket and handed it to me. He manned the door just in case some poor lost lamb decided to wander in and wash his clothes on a Saturday night. As Nutty plugged the quarters in, he said not to start it up until he was ready. He reminded me of a squirrel looking for a nut in November. All business. He slid into the machine, took a deep breath, and gave me the thumbs up.

I pushed the button, and the dryer started up slowly with a thud, picking up speed until a constant rhythm was found. I watched Nutty closely to see if I could learn anything from his technique. All I saw was a human ball with teeth clenched and eyes pinched shut. Then I had this burst of laughter. I turned around and tried to keep quiet. I didn't want to throw Nutty off his game and then have to listen to his excuses when I won. I looked at the stopwatch, hoping that would help regain my composure. Forty-two seconds and he was still going strong. I glanced back at Nutty, and this time I had to bite my lip. His mom would have been proud to see this. The guy didn't have a clue how to do a load of laundry, but there he was, rolling around like some smelly pair of tighty whities. At a minute fifty-three, Nutty yelled, "uncle."

I helped him crawl out. He made it a whole step and a half before he lost his balance and hit the deck. Nutty made his way over to the garbage can and hovered there for a good five minutes or so. His stomach eventually regrouped without any spewage, and he was back giving orders before we knew it.

"Okay, Milkers, your turn. Let's see what you're made of. Gil, you man the door."

I still had enough of a view from my lookout spot to watch some of the action. With Nutty's help, Milkers was able to cram himself into one of the two industrial sized dryers. When the start button was pressed, I glanced at my watch just to keep them honest. After a minute passed, it looked like Nutty was already trying to get him out.

A flash of light caught my attention and I swung around to see a car pulling into Ed's parking lot. My heart was about ready to pop out of my chest.

“Get him out of there,” I half whispered, half yelled. “We’ve got company.”

“Give me a hand,” Nutty called.

We each grabbed an arm and gave a yank. “Take it easy,” Milkers said.

“All right, just be quiet,” I said. “We’re going to hide in case it’s a cop. We’ll be back to get you out.”

It was too late. The door opened before Nutty and I had a chance to do anything, and sure enough, it was Officer Rick, the biggest stickler of all time. I nudged the dryer door until it was close to shut and stood in front of it.

“Howdy boys,” he said. “I was just cruising by, and normally I don’t see anyone in here this late. Just thought I’d check it out.”

“Everything’s fine in here, sir,” I said.

“You fellas aren’t eighteen yet, are you?” he asked in that dumb voice people use to ask a question they already know the answer to.

“Not quite, sir,” Nutty said. “But we’re just doing a little laundry. It’s not like we’re robbing the place.”

“You know the rules, fellas. Curfew is eleven o’clock for minors. If I let you get away with it, I’d have to let everybody else, and then the law wouldn’t be doing jack crap, now would it?”

“What if we promise to head right home when our laundry is finished?” I pleaded, hoping for an easy out.

“Sorry guys,” Officer Rick said. “I’m still going to have to write you up. It’s Gil Sanders, is that correct?”

“Yep.”

In a city as small as Washburn, sometimes the cops know your name even if you’ve never had to deal with them before.

“And how about you? You look like you could be one of the Walker boys, am I right?”

“No. I’m not real sure where you’re getting that name, sir,” Nutty said. He had a real talent for turning sir into the equivalent of moron.

Officer Rick wrote out our curfew violation tickets and handed them over.

“Thanks, I guess,” Nutty said.

“Now the minute your laundry is finished, I want you boys on your way home, you hear me?”

Before we had a chance to say boo, Milkens did it for us. His allergies were in full force that day, and he let out a sneeze that Paul Bunyan wouldn’t be able to match.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Officer Rick asked.

He told me to move out of the way. I wish I could have taken a picture of his face when he opened that dryer door.

“Get out of there,” he yelled. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t, sir,” Milkens said. “I’m stuck.”

Even though we couldn’t laugh, the highlight of that whole night was watching Officer Rick try to pull Milkens out. His face turned red, and I think he even started to wheeze. I’m not sure how he finally jarred Milkens loose, but it’s a good thing he did,

because the vein in his neck had grown to the size of a night crawler. He huffed and puffed while he wrote Milkers a ticket and told us to do some explaining.

I said that we bet Milkers he couldn't fit into one of the dryers. I figured that story would do us the least amount of damage.

"Let me tell you something, boys," Officer Rick said. "In these types of situations, I don't hesitate one nanosecond to ask owners if they want to press charges."

He looked around the place until he saw the tiny sign that asked customers to call if any of the machines weren't working properly. He typed in the number listed on the sign and waited. When nobody answered, he hung up and dialed again.

"What?" a voice asked. It came through loud enough that we could all listen in on the conversation.

"Hello. This is Officer Rick with the Washburn Police Department. I'm hoping to speak to the owner of Ed's Laundromat."

"This is Ed."

"I'm calling to inform you that I found a young man stuck in one of your dryers. It appears that he and his cohorts had no intentions of washing or drying any clothes. Are you interested in pressing charges?"

"Did they break anything?"

"It doesn't appear that way."

"Did they steal anything?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Then I wish you wouldn't have woken me up."

Ed hung up at that point, but Officer Rick kept on talking.

“I’ll be sure to relay that message,” he said. “Any more of this monkeying around in your Laundromat and you’ll make sure they’re prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Okay, then. You have yourself a good night as well. Bye.”

Officer Rick sent us home. The police car drove by real slow a couple of times to make sure we had an appropriate destination in mind. We decided it would be best if I went for my spin the following night. It was foolproof. Officer Rick wouldn’t think we’d be dumb enough to try it again.

Since Nutty’s folks were the only ones who didn’t mind how late we stayed out, we had already made plans to spend the night at the McNutts’. That was the first time Milkens or I had been to Nutty’s house, and neither of us had met his parents yet, either. When we made it there, Mr. McNutt must have been asleep, but his mom was still curled up on the couch listening to Van Morrison’s “Sweet Thing” and reading *The Color Purple*.

“Hi, Mrs. McNutt,” I said.

“Oh, don’t be silly. You boys call me Rose now, you hear? I don’t want to be made to feel like an old lady any more than you do,” she joked.

She must’ve caught Milkens glaring at her bald head.

“I’ve got the cancer,” she said. “No worries, though. I’m doing fine. At first, the chemotherapy made my hair fall out in clumps like a cat in the summer heat, and I had a very hard time with that for a while.”

She rubbed her head, took a drag off her cigarette, and smiled.

“Truth is, though, once it all fell out I began to sort of like it. Don’t have to worry about washing it, drying it, styling it, cutting it, or any of those things that used to take up far too much of my time.”

I thought she looked surprisingly attractive without any hair. It allowed her full lips and emerald eyes to stand out.

“That’s enough about me, though,” she said. “Sometimes I blabber on without an end in sight. Why don’t you boys tell me the story of your lives while I fix up some fresh cookies for you?”

And that’s exactly what we did. We stayed up into the middle of the night telling Rose all about us. She listened in a way that made me and Milkers want to extend our stories on and on. She asked questions, and nodded, and said umm-hmm, and looked us in the eyes, all while bouncing around the kitchen and mixing together the proper ingredients. Her laugh was so unique and likable. It was high-pitched and loud, but not in an annoying way. It was contagious, and it made me want to do anything I could to hear it again.

She even let us try a drink of one of the Malibu and Cokes she sipped on the whole time. It tasted like sweetened coconuts.

We slept in late the next day, and although Rose wasn’t as energetic, she did make us all a feast for brunch. Milkers and I practically felt like family as the bacon sizzled and the smell of pancakes floated through the house.

That’s when we met Mr. McNutt. He didn’t do much talking on his own, and asking him a question was fine if you liked one word answers. This far-off look took over

his entire face like he was living a whole other life in another world even though his body had to stay put in Washburn.

On our walk home, Milkers and I tried to figure out how someone as fun, and friendly, and interesting as Rose ever wound up married to such a bore.

It was going on nine o'clock at night on that very same Sunday when we met back up to finish the first event. If we happened to get busted again for taking a ride in a dryer, we figured it would be best not to get another curfew violation on top of it.

Nutty was the lookout, and Milkers manned the stopwatch. They both got down on their knees to make sure we couldn't be seen through the windows this time just in case Rick was on the lookout. He wouldn't have anything better to do if he was on patrol.

I plugged my quarters into the machine and climbed in. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so helpless. I didn't want Nutty to jump out to an early lead in our summer battle, though, so I pumped myself up. All I had to do was sit still for two minutes and I would be the champ.

Milkers asked me if I was ready, so I squeezed my eyes shut and said, "Start it up, Milk Duds."

The first rotation sent a jolt through my body. Following my game plan, I escaped to the happiest place I could imagine, a land filled with green grass and colorful flowers. I floated along on a fluffy cloud. Beautiful women fed me grapes and massaged my body. The sun shone, birds chirped, and the butterflies played tag.

At some point, my dream world morphed into a nightmare. Flashes of color went off like fireworks. The grass died and turned from black to white to black again. The

women turned into giant cockroaches that played tug-of-war with me until my arms and legs popped off. My cloud disintegrated, and I fell down a bottomless pit.

“Uncle. Uncle!”

“You did it, man,” Milkers said. “Two minutes and eighteen seconds.”

I would have yelled at Milkers for not saying something the second I beat Nutty’s time, but my stomach was doing all my thinking at that point. I told Milkers to grab me a garbage can. When he crawled back with one, I stuck my head out of the dryer and put it directly over the can. My head was spinning, but I still had a will to win because I held back the first few stomach movements. You can only fight it for so long, though. One massive hurl and it was all over.

On the way home, I heard about it from the guys, but it didn’t really bother me. I was the clear underdog going into the event. I may have been disqualified, but I did last longer than Milkers and Nutty, and that had to count for something.

TRAIN TRACKS AND COOKIE DUSTERS

SUMMER 1999

“As we all know, mustaches have become a joke,” I began. “It hasn’t been cool to sport a stache since the 70s, and *Magnum, P.I.* was the only reason people could pull it off in the 80s. I think it’s about time we bring them back in style with a little mustache growing contest.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Milkers said.

“Would I kid you about something as serious as an official Moon Wars event?” I asked. “We start tonight. You’re allowed to shave up until 7:00 p.m. After that, the rules are simple. First, no trimming the stache. And second, you have to shave the rest of your face at least once every forty-eight hours. If you break either of these rules, you’re gonzo. Whoever grows a mustache for the longest period of time wins. This will obviously last longer than a week, but I can’t imagine that any other events will be affected.”

We went back to our own houses to shave that night. I waited until five minutes to seven before I did it. Seems stupid, but I’d bet money the other guys did the same thing.

The next day, we spent a whole afternoon lining the train tracks with anything we could find, but mainly we paid close attention to how much our mustaches had grown. We put a stick, a rock, an empty beer can, and a full can of soda along the tracks. Then we placed our bets on how far they’d all be carried along the railway before getting tossed to the side. We waited until the train raced by, and after it passed, we picked up our crushed coins, measured distances traveled, and settled up on our bets.

Nutty wanted to see what it would feel like to be right next to something that could squash us no problem and keep on moving like nothing ever happened. So the next time a train passed, we inched as close as possible in order to suck up all the power, noise, and excitement.

Nutty got closer to the train than Milkers or me.

After a week went by, we were all hanging tough but started to look pretty gross, some more than others. My peach fuzz was noticeable, mostly because I have dark hair. Milkers's blond hair gave him a loophole. His mustache couldn't be seen from a distance, but he was starting to look funny up close. He had two strips with a big gap in the middle. Nutty looked hilarious and disgusting all at once. He had a total of about twenty squirrely hairs poking out in all directions that didn't even come close to forming a complete mustache. Wimpy from the Popeye cartoons even put him to shame.

Ten days into it, we went over to Milkers's house to watch a movie, and his dad tore into Nutty. I thought Mr. Harrison would single-handedly humiliate Nutty enough to make him cave in and shave.

"Hey, you've got a little dirt on your upper lip," he said. "Why don't you put a little milk on there and let the cat lick it off?"

"Don't be jealous, Mr. Harrison," Nutty said. "I know you like it."

"I didn't think it was possible, but you look even more disgusting than these two hooligans," Mr. Harrison said.

A few days later, Nutty told us that Mrs. Hartwheeler asked him to shave.

“You and your mustache are scaring the customers,” Nutty said, imitating her. “I didn’t mention it at first because I thought surely you would have the common sense to remove it yourself. I can no longer sit back and allow this to continue, however. Please shave that dreadful mustache before coming back to work again.”

Of course Nutty wasn’t going to sit back and take that. Before his next shift, Nutty cut some hair off his head and glued it to his upper lip. Nutty said Mrs. Hartwheeler flipped out and fired him on the spot.

Nutty ended up shaving five days later. His cousin was getting married, and Nutty’s mom told him that she would drop dead of embarrassment if he showed up with his mustache.

Milkers and I were still hanging in there, but I felt the pressure. It seemed like every time I met eyes with someone, every time I looked in the mirror, every time my hand brushed against those whiskers, I felt a rush of embarrassment and wanted to grab a razor. I felt like the whole world was pointing and laughing at me. The whole idea of the contest was to look funny, but I knew that most people didn’t quite get our sense of humor.

Sal was different, though. When I dropped by to check in on him, he didn’t waste any time getting a wise crack in. “That’s quite the cookie duster you have there, Gil,” he said, smiling. “Quite the cookie duster, indeed.” I never did explain the contest to him, but he understood well enough that it was all a joke.

The turning point came on day twenty-six. I ran to the Pump n’ Munch to pick up a gallon of gas for our lawnmower. While I filled the container, I heard a car horn. I

looked up to see the Milkermobile slowly pass by. Mr. and Mrs. Harrison gave me a wave, so I did the same. Then I looked closer, and I saw Milkermobile in the backseat. Instead of waving, he slowly brought his hand to his mouth, licked his pinky and thumb, and wetted both strips of his mustache. It was a clever twist on the eyebrow slick. Milkermobile couldn't have gotten his message across more clearly. He was confident and wasn't even near the breaking point. I have to admit, out of the three of us he did look the best with a mustache. He looked like he was built to ride a Harley or become a professional arm-wrestler.

My mind raced as I mowed the lawn. It's possible that Milkermobile was bluffing, I told myself. He pushed all his chips in, and I had to make a move. By the time I finished, I had decided to keep it going. I wasn't about to let Milkermobile play mind games with me.

I hopped in the shower, dried off, and took a good long look in the mirror. I saw past myself to all the goofy looking mustaches I've laughed at with the guys. Without thinking, I slapped on some shaving cream and hacked it off.

I felt disgusted as I stared at the whiskers in the sink. I knew I'd have to shape up my mental game if I wanted to have a shot at being the champ.

SUPER STREAKER, WHITE LIGHTNING, AND BALLS MAGEE SAVE THE DAY
SUMMER 1999

I was ready for any event Nutty could throw at us. For a week straight, I said my own little daily affirmation, just like Mrs. Wingledon used to tell us to do. Hers was pretty dumb, though, so I made up my own version. I woke up, looked in the mirror, and said, “You’re tough. You’re an animal. You are a raging bear who has just been stung by a whole swarm of bees.” I said it five times in a row, getting meaner and louder every time. Well, I got as loud as I could without letting anyone else hear me. I didn’t want my parents to think I was out of my gourd.

When Nutty told us that the next event would involve streaking, my daily affirmations are the only thing that kept me from losing it. I felt like grabbing Nutty by the shoulders and shaking him until he’d realize how crazy it would be to streak in Washburn. I guessed it would take less than twenty-four hours after the event for my parents to find out about it. I didn’t have the option of trying to talk some sense into Nutty, though. He wouldn’t change his mind. That’s a fact. If he sensed any weakness from Milkies or me, he’d go from whatever he had in mind to something even worse. I had to prove that I was a furious grizzly bear ready to steal a family’s camping supplies, or kill on sight, or even show off my whole kit & caboodle.

Keeping all this in mind, I gave Nutty a glare and told him to give us the details. It would have been nice if I’d said it in my normal voice, or better yet, an octave lower. About five minutes later the jokes about my voice cracking had almost stopped, and

Nutty began to tell us the plan, interrupting himself now and then to ask if the woman who spoke up earlier had anything else to add.

“We’ll start the parade at nine o’clock tomorrow night,” Nutty began. “We’ll run in and out of every bar in downtown Washburn. Those drunks who sit on the barstools and drool on themselves every night of the week deserve a little entertainment for once. We’ll strip down in the alley behind Buddy’s Tavern, and that’ll be the first place we hit. We’ll work our way up Main Street, and from there, anyone who hasn’t chickened out yet will head up onto the highway where they’ll stay between the mayonnaise and the mustard.”

“What the hell does it mean to stay between the mayonnaise and the mustard?” Milkers asked. I was glad he did because I was confused, too.

“I swear, Milkers,” Nutty said. “Sometimes I worry about you. It means stay between the white line and the yellow line, just like the cars have to. No hiding on the side of the road. Any vehicles who want to ride on our road will go around us. Don’t worry about getting hit. If you’re still in the running, you’ll be our human reflector.”

Milkers could hop on a spaceship, shake hands with the sun, and still not get a decent tan.

“This is bull,” Milkers said. “Who’s not going to be able to guess who I am? There aren’t a whole lot of two hundred ninety-five pound guys in this town who are immature enough to go streaking.”

“Shut your yapper,” Nutty said. “People have just as good a chance at recognizing me or Gil. As I was saying, you’ll be out of the running if you cover up the twig and

berries, if you hide, or if you don't follow the path I just laid out. Milkers, I know your stomach is probably growling from the mayonnaise and mustard comment I made, so let's go grab a bite to eat."

Nutty must have been right because Milkers ordered a jumbo sub with everything on it when we got to the Pudgy Seagull. While we ate, Nutty told us we could cover our faces however we wanted, but we each had to come up with a name for ourselves, like a superhero, and somehow display it for everyone to see.

"It'll give us a shot at fame," Nutty explained. "When the witnesses tell the story of what happened, they'll have names to give to the streakers. The story might make the paper and it'll be retold by friends of friends, and before you know it, we'll be legends."

I wanted to find a costume that would make it as hard as possible for people to tell it was me. I dug through every piece of clothing in our house before I decided what to wear. I found a black ski mask, and out in the garage I came across an old football helmet, too. It was an old birthday gift that I never really used. As for my name, it just came to me when I tried my outfit on for size. I wrote Super Streaker in large block letters on my football helmet with a permanent marker. I knew I'd have to destroy the evidence after the streaking, but I didn't think the helmet would be missed.

When Saturday night finally rolled around, I threw my mask and helmet into my backpack and started off toward Buddy's, hoping the fresh air would help my queasy stomach. It didn't.

“Are you ladies ready for this?” Nutty asked when we met in the alley. Who knows how early he had shown up. Milkers and I decided not to answer his little insult. At five to nine, Nutty said it was time to ditch our clothes and throw on our costumes.

Milkers wore a paper bag with big, round eyeholes and another circle for an air hole. He drew a lightning bolt on each side of the bag, and wrote White Lightning on the front. Nutty wore pantyhose on his head that squished his entire face so badly that he really was unrecognizable. He also had one of those nametags that says “Hello My Name is” plastered to his chest. He filled in Balls Magee in big, bold letters. I put on the ski mask and strapped on my helmet, and I was ready to roll.

We all took a deep breath and entered Buddy’s through the back door. I can’t remember what happened in that first bar. My mind went blank. I think I was dealing with an adrenaline overload.

Once we had made our way to The Pig Sty, a handful of my brain cells kicked in because I can clearly remember what happened. Everybody in there started hooting and hollering, and Nutty slowed down to plant a kiss on the cheek of some old lady who was bellied up to the bar. You should have seen the look on her face. “Am I drunk, or are you beautiful?” she slurred. The guy she was with ran after us for a second, but I guess he decided that he didn’t want to be known as the idiot who beat up a bunch of naked teenagers, so he gave up the chase.

In Gazungas, the strip club, we hopped up on stage and did a quick dance along with the lady who was already working the pole. I always wondered what it would be like to see a completely naked woman in real life. I imagined it being slow, beautiful, and sort

of magical, kind of like the first time I watched a shooting star drift across the sky. But my first experience was quick, ordinary, and depressing.

The stripper had wrinkles at the corners of her eyes that were only partly covered up by all the makeup she had globbed on. Her boobs looked like sagging, deflated tires and her oversized nipples like hubcaps. She had stretch marks, too, and the reminder that she's a mom made it even worse.

There were five customers in Gazungas. I heard a deep belly laugh from one. Another guy quietly chuckled to himself and clapped in applause. One guy stood up, pumped his fist, and shouted for us to get out of there. One cupped his hands to make sure his repeated boos traveled as far as possible, and the last guy just calmly downed a shot like he'd seen streakers run through the strip joint every other night of his life.

We weaved through several bars and made it into our final stop on Main Street. Nutty froze when we entered The Thirsty Camel. The person sitting at the end of the bar sure figured out who we were. I knew that much. We ran out toward the highway when Nutty broke from the path and headed in the direction of our starting point. No words were spoken, but I knew what was happening.

Nutty's old man was the one who stopped him in his tracks. He told us that his dad only went to Whisky Dick's, a tavern out in the country, and that there was no way we'd bump into him downtown. Nutty probably wanted to grab his clothes and beat him home so he could at least try to make up a story.

I felt for Nutty, but I was in this mess deep enough that I wasn't ready to throw in the towel because of his bad luck. There wasn't much Milkers or I could've done to help at that point, anyhow.

We moseyed our way onto the highway right smack dab between the mayonnaise and the mustard, just like Nutty ordered. There we were, White Lightning and Super Streaker, side by side. As I jogged along, I thought to myself that when I live on my own I'd like to do just about everything naked. I'd cook naked, sleep naked, do sit-ups naked, you name it.

That mental note was crumpled up into a ball when we noticed headlights shining on our hineys. I looked over my shoulder and saw the driver laughing. I guess you could say it was a relief to realize that my life wasn't in danger, but I didn't feel all that relieved. We kept on running as the lights slid over and lit up the other lane.

Okay, I figured, someone's going to have a chuckle, pass us, and be on their way. Nope. The car pulled up along side us and stayed there. They honked, waved, whistled, pointed, and honked some more, just tooling along at a couple miles an hour. I felt like every person in that car could see right through my helmet and mask.

Then I noticed Kristy Stevens sitting in the backseat. She was the only one in the car who wasn't making any noise. She just stared out the window with a smile on her face. I could've sworn she was a goddess.

The one bright spot of the situation was that Milkers's reflexes kicked in before mine. He covered up and ran off the road, breaking two of the rules and automatically

crowning me the winner of the event. I followed suit, and we did our best to hide behind some bushes while we figured out our next move.

That move was to haul it back to where we left our clothes. Occasionally, we ducked behind a dumpster, or a bush, or a lawn ornament to take a breather and see if we could spot anyone. We were lucky enough to make it back without any more humiliation. The worst case scenario is that someone peeping out their window saw us from a distance. As I threw my clothes back on and tossed my helmet into a nearby garbage can, I figured that was about as close as I would ever get to becoming a running back.

Milkers and I both knew what Nutty would have to deal with that night.

The first time we noticed anything was the swim at the start of summer. There was just a lone bruise on his back, so we didn't think much of it at the time. Once the temperatures began to rise and Nutty wore more shorts and t-shirts, we had noticed a few more awful-looking bruises on his arms and legs.

He never told us the details. The first few times we tried to bring it up, he'd just make up a fancy lie, or change the subject, or crack a joke like it was no big deal. There are some things a guy just doesn't want to talk about, so after a while we stopped asking.

Every time I saw a fresh mark on Nutty, though, my anger grew. It was like a fire in the pit of my stomach that crackled, and rose higher, and eventually bubbled over until I knew that I hated his dad.

It seemed like Mr. McNutt didn't need an excuse to hit Nutty after a night of drinking, but that night Nutty gave him one.

SEPTEMBER 1999

Most people think I turned into some horrible screw-up because I hit a girl on the second day of high school. I didn't hit just any girl, though. I hit Mrs. Tibbets, the smallest lunch lady in the universe. And that's the kind of thing you don't live down.

Ever.

Then again, most people don't know what really happened that day I turned into the equivalent of the lint that gets stuck in your belly button.

I had spent the final week of summer lying in bed. My parents tried talking to me, and they tried to cheer me up, and they did their best to get me out of bed, but none of it worked, so eventually they just took turns bringing meals up to my room. The day before the start of the school year they came up together, so I knew right away I was in for it. When parents can't handle things on their own, sometimes they pull a tag-team. I always wished I had a brother or a sister so I could have someone on my side when I needed the help.

"Your mother and I think it's about time you get back into the swing of things," Dad said. "We expect you to get up tomorrow morning and head to school."

I wasn't in the mood to talk, and I definitely wasn't ready to argue against two adults who already had their minds made up, so I grunted in agreement and threw the covers back over my head.

I was too nervous to get much sleep before that first day of school. It made me sick knowing that Nutty wouldn't be there with me. During the few winks I caught, I had

a nightmare about trying to open my locker. I stood there and tried the combination over and over. Everyone else opened theirs just fine, grabbed their books, and walked to their next class as I spent hours trying to do the same. Finally, I gave up and walked into class, but the period was almost finished. Everyone stared at me until I woke up to the beeping of my alarm clock.

As I walked out to the bus stop that morning, seeing Sammy, the bus driver, cooled my nerves a bit. A little regularity never killed anyone. Sammy's been my bus driver for three years now, and the mystery continues. I still can't tell if it's a male or female, but I spend every ride examining its hair, and voice, and clothes for clues. I wish I could just ask flat out whether it's a man or woman, but I don't have the heart. I mean it is a human being after all.

It wasn't long before we made it to Washburn High. Most of the morning was the same old first day routine. First, get your textbook. Write down every rip, tear, crinkle, and swear word in the book so you don't get charged for it at the end of the year. Next, sit down in the assigned seat that would become your dungeon. And finally, listen to the teacher sum up their meaningless life in less than ten minutes.

After lunch, I had Art class with Mrs. Schwartz, and I was kind of looking forward to it. I'll be the first one to admit that I'm not the next Picasso, but I wanted to take a fun class. I was surprised when Mrs. Schwartz started us in on a project right away. She gave us all a blank sheet of paper and pencil, and told us to draw whatever popped into our heads. As she said that, I looked out the window and saw a squirrel run by. Toward the end of class, Mrs. Schwartz strolled around the room, admiring everyone's

work. When she got to me, she picked up my drawing and showed it off while saying it was a great example of what not to do. She pointed out that my drawing only took up about a tenth of the paper, and that I should have centered the squirrel instead of squishing it into the corner. It must have taken a solid two minutes, minimum, before the laughter stopped.

I pretended to laugh, too.

When the bell rang, I strolled to my locker, head down, minding my own business. Hands grabbed me. I was crammed inside before I knew it. It was darker than dark. I heard a girl giggle and say, “You’re so funny, Dave.” I knew for a fact that there were only two Daves in the whole school, and at that time one of them was probably already buried in his textbook getting a stiffy while solving an advanced Algebra calculation. That left Dave Becker. Mr. Bigshot. Star pitcher. Star point guard. Star quarterback. The guy who could run circles around any other athlete in this town. The brick wall who had his teammates slap him in the face before the start of a game to get him fired up.

After a while, there was dead silence. About fifteen minutes (two months in locker time) went by before I heard anyone. It turned out to be the janitor. I thought he was going to have a hernia the way he was laughing. After he calmed down, I gave him my combo and he let me out.

I missed the bus, so the three mile walk home gave me plenty of time to think. I decided that I wasn’t going to take crap from anybody at school the next day. So what if I was just a freshman? Even maggots deserve a shred of respect.

At dinner, Mom and Dad asked me how my first day went, so I just said “good” while wearing my best poker face. They wouldn’t understand the life of a high schooler.

When the next day came to an end and everybody scurried to their lockers, I followed, ready to fight anybody who thought about stuffing me into a locker again. I hadn’t been in a fight my whole life, but that day I was a different person. All I thought about was how hard I’d hit Dave Becker or anyone else who touched me. It’s funny, but I was almost hoping Dave would try it again. I wanted to hit the guy who could pound me further into the ground than anyone else. I was just waiting for an excuse. So when I felt a hand on my shoulder, I turned and swung.

Mrs. Tibbets was just trying to hand me a folder I had left behind on a lunch table, but she could’ve been Dave Becker for all I knew. My punch came close to missing to her completely. I only grazed her shoulder, but it was enough to knock her to the ground.

Everyone near me gasped, and yelled, and pointed. Pretty soon a group had formed around me. Whoever didn’t see what happened was told, and the story spread.

Mrs. Tibbets just laid there sprawled out on the ground, looking confused. I helped her up and she said she was fine, so I apologized and speed-walked out of the school. People on the buses had already magically caught wind, though. Heads leaned out of the windows to call me a woman-beater and worse.

The meeting held the next day was pretty much a discussion about my punishment. Sitting in the principal’s office was a brand new experience for me. My whole life I’d been the quiet kid who got good grades and didn’t get into a speck of trouble.

My parents, Principal Knox, Mrs. Tibbets, Officer Rick, and Psycho Steve were all there. The guidance counselor's real name is Mr. Squibble, but everybody calls him Psycho Steve. Right off the bat, Principal Knox asked if I had anything to say to Mrs. Tibbets. I could've tried explaining what really happened, but I didn't feel like it. I didn't feel like explaining anything to anyone.

"Sorry," was about all I could get out.

"Sometimes sorry doesn't feed the bulldog," Principal Knox said.

"What does that even mean?" I asked.

"You'll figure it out soon enough."

I've heard it all by now. I've been told that "all things happen for a reason," but the ones who say this aren't able to explain to me the reason Nutty had to die. The one that really gets me is, "I know how you feel." The people who say this usually go on about someone close to them who's died, and to be honest, I could care less. It pisses me off that these people turn the situation into their loss and start rambling about some dead person I've never met.

Knox's comment is the one that put me over the edge, though.

"I realize that dealing with a friend's death is confusing," he said. "Makes you want to turn the whole world into your own punching bag." He slicked back his hair and let out a deep breath. "You have every right to be angry. But you never have the right to strike another individual."

I clapped quietly, just a golf clap at first, but then I went all out. I slapped my hands together harder and faster. I stepped onto my chair and cheered. I stuck two fingers

in my mouth and let out a whale of a whistle. Finally, I took a seat again. No one else knew what to say to that, so I helped them all out.

“That was beautiful, Principal Knox,” I said. “Sorry, but I can’t take you seriously with those nose hairs pointing at me like I’m some kind of freak show. Talk to me after you get a trim.”

I walked out.

In the end, it was decided that I had to go to the guidance counselor’s office until my anger problem was under control.

The first time I met with Psycho Steve, he was fifteen minutes late. Out of nowhere, he came tearing through the door. Handouts with titles like “How to Cope with Loss” and “The Brighter Side of Death” flew out of his hands. He calmed down while he explained to me the battle he had just finished with the copy machine. I didn’t say much that first time we met, or the time after, or the time after that.

Instead, I drew doodles of Psycho Steve. The guy is a monster. He’s at least six and a half feet tall, but skinny, and his neck is longer than a giraffe’s. His hair is a silver and white combo, and it’s about shoulder length. Or it would be down to his shoulders if it weren’t sticking up in every direction. I swear it looked like he had just walked out of a tornado. His glasses are even funnier than his hair. They’re two gigantic squares connected by a straight nosepiece, and they’re always crooked. His high-water pants always match his suits, which are definitely from the 70s because they have those big patches over the elbows and are the ugliest colors you could ever dream up.

Soon I turned these doodles into a character named Super Squib. He hides a handgun in his hair but prefers to defeat his enemies by burying them in truckloads of pamphlets about death.

Before I knew it, I came up with more ideas and more characters. Super Squib is just the sidekick of the evil Dr. McNutt. His son, Benny, is different from everyone else. He's the human version of a supernova, a stellar explosion that lights up the whole universe.

Dr. McNutt knows that when a supernova fades away, it can create a black hole. So he tortures his own son, Benny, until he kills himself, and then plans to take over the world. Not everyone is pulled in right away, so he breaks the giant black hole into a bunch of mini ones disguised as regular everyday objects.

One of his henchmen pushes Intergalactic Gil into a black hole that looks like a locker. The force that sucks him in is strong enough to deform him. This is called spaghettification. First, Intergalactic Gil splits into two noodles, then into four, and soon he is no longer human. He becomes a big pile of spaghetti and meatballs. As he is pulled in further and further, time slows down, and he becomes lost to the outside universe.

Everybody knows that nothing can escape a black hole. Not even light. But Intergalactic Gil must do the impossible. He has to fight his way out and settle the score with the villain responsible for Benny McNutt's death in order to save the universe from total destruction.

I worked on my comic book whenever I had to go to Psycho Steve's office. Once in a while, he'd try to ask me questions or strike up a conversation, but I just gave him the silent treatment until he left me alone.

OCTOBER 1999

In study hall, Kristy Stevens, musky of all muskies, sat next to me.

We came up with a code for girls over the summer thinking it'd come in handy for high school. We knew there would be more big fish in the sea now that we were leaving the little middle school pond and all its guppies behind.

Muskies were the babes, northerns were cute, bass were average, carp were the ones you throw back, and suckers were the ones you made sure you didn't even cast at. We could talk about girls when they were right in front of us, and they didn't have a clue.

I'd say something like, "Did you reel any in over the weekend?"

Milkers would go, "Nah, on Saturday I went after a couple of bass, but I snagged my line going after the first one and came away with a big old hunk of seaweed when I casted in the direction of the large mouth. How about you?"

Then I'd say something like, "No luck. But take a look at this northern swimming by right now. The one with the stripes. I'd like to give her my worm."

It didn't matter if I'd say something like that when we were not even close to a body of water because if any girls happened to overhear the conversation, the first mention of fish or fishing would make nine out of ten tune it out immediately.

Nutty would say, "Look out, buddy. If the only thing you're working with is a worm, you'd better let me handle this one."

Kristy Stevens is the fish I wanted to marry since the third grade. Cheerleader. Blond hair. Blue eyes.

We used to be good friends. When her chest suddenly sprouted two perfectly round grapefruits, though, she had a whole lot more guys hanging on her and she had started to become tight with the bitchy clan, including a lot of older girls.

There weren't any other seats open by the time Kristy walked into study hall, but I'd like to think she would have sat next to me anyhow. Her long hair was pulled back tight in a ponytail. Her lips were a darker red than usual, but her smile was the same as always. Her tiny shorts showed off her tan legs even though the Wisconsin summer was long gone.

I popped in a breath mint and struck up a conversation. She told me her summer was boring, and she was tired of her parents trying to control her life.

"It was good seeing you that one time, though," she said, smirking. Then she turned around and talked to Becky Rodgers.

I could feel my face warming and reddening in a hurry because I knew there was only one time she might have seen me over the summer. I guess the ski mask and football helmet combo hadn't disguised me quite as well as I'd hoped.

While I tried thinking up ways to talk to Kristy again, I overheard her giggle and say, "You're so funny." That phrase kept repeating in my mind until I had a flashback and realized her voice matched the one who said, "You're so funny, Dave" when I was crammed inside that locker.

I decided I was done with love for good when the loudspeaker interrupted my thought. They really need to turn the volume down on that thing. The office lady asked Frank Forter to come to the office. The room exploded, and I couldn't help joining in. His

parents ought to be locked up for life because that has to be some sort of child abuse. The next thing the office lady said was, “Gil Sanders, please come to the office. You forgot your inhaler, and your mother dropped it off for you.” Sometimes I wondered if my mom had a master plan in place to sabotage my life, but I only gave her twenty percent of the blame on this one. The rest was put on the shoulders of the idiot office lady. I’m sure glad she told the whole school the exact reason I had to go to the office.

Hearing everybody laugh at Frank’s name made me think that some people have their destiny all laid out for them right off the bat. It doesn’t matter where he would have grown up. All kids would make the decision to change one letter and call the guy Frankfurter.

Benny had it laid out in about the same way. McNutt is a name you just can’t avoid when it comes to dishing out nicknames. His family moved to Washburn from California half-way through eighth grade. On his first day of school in Washburn, the principal called me to his office and asked me to show Benny around. I realized within two minutes that there was something different about him, in a good way, and whatever it was set him apart from everyone else I had ever met in my life. From that moment on, Benny’s effortless confidence somehow rubbed off on me little by little, and my shyness lessened whenever he was around. He hadn’t lived in town more than a month before earning the nickname, but it was such a perfect fit that it seemed inevitable from the start. Unusual ideas popped into his head all the time, and unlike most, he was willing to act on them. He was Nutty.

There are some good nicknames out there, but those are saved for the super popular. For anyone else, all it takes is one slip of the tongue or one wrong move and BAM, you could be slapped with a rotten new nametag for the rest of your life. Take Milkens, for example. He was born August Harrison, and everybody called him Auggie. A pretty solid name, if you ask me, but all it took was one little incident to transform him into the one and only Milkens.

It was fifth grade gym class and we had to shower off after basketball. A couple of the guys were giving Auggie crap about his weight. They started grabbing his chest and asking him if he lost his bra, and like any smart person who's being humiliated, Auggie tried to shrug it off by turning their jokes into a bigger laugh. So Auggie said to the guys, "Hey, if you're thirsty, all you had to do was ask." Then he grabbed a man boob in each hand and pretended to milk himself like he was a heifer. Aside from his family, I haven't heard a person call him Auggie since.

I could tell the name stung a bit, or at least it did at first. After a while, I was the only one calling him Auggie, and if you're the only person who's not calling someone by their accepted nickname, it's like you're asking for an even worse one, so eventually I joined the crowd. Even though he never talked about it, his smile became a bit smaller after that. He has one of those rare smiles that seems to take up his entire face and shows off every one of his teeth, but it took a while after that before I saw the same kind of grin come back. I doubt whether anyone else noticed. I mean we're talking about centimeters, but it's the type of thing you're able to notice about a person you've known your whole life.

Milkers and I have literally known each other since we were in diapers. We live on the same block, and our moms are longtime friends, so they pretty much decided we'd be buddies before we knew what hit us. I can't complain, though. Milkers is one of the nicest people I've ever met. He's a friendly giant. If he ever saw a fly backstroking in the toilet, he'd probably try to build it a tiny toilet paper kickboard. That's how nice the guy is. Except on the football field. Out there, he's a wild, angry beast.

Things were different between us since the end of summer. We still talked to each other and we still hung out, but we played this game of pretending everything was okay.

When your friend dies, it changes the way you think about everything.

I used to wonder who would be next to break the record for most corndogs eaten in one lunch period. I wondered how much older I'd look once all my chest hair finally grew in. I wondered whether my feet would ever stop growing. I wondered if the moon is made out of cheese, and if so, how many grilled cheese sandwiches I could make out of it before it would disappear forever. I wondered what dogs would say if they could talk. I wondered who would win the next big football game. I used to think life was too short, and I thought up ways to drag it out and make it seem longer.

After Nutty's death, I wondered what sort of secrets people kept from everyone else. I wondered how much pain was hiding behind all the fake smiles I saw every day. Every time I passed someone, I thought up all the horrible names they'd probably been called in their life. I wondered why all the adults I saw decided to crawl out of bed, drive off to work, and go home to do it all again the next day. I wondered what World War III would be like. I wondered if a bolt of lightning would drop out of a cloud and drill me, or

if a bird would decide to take a monster dump right on my noggin like I was Mother Nature's target practice. I thought about how long a lifetime could be for someone who's always lonely and unhappy. I thought of ways to speed life up.

I'm not the only one who changed. One day, Milkers came to school with the world's worst case of bed head. He wore sweatpants and a t-shirt with so many holes and strings dangling off that it could've disintegrated at any second. It looked like a spider had woven a red web over his half shut eyeballs.

"What did you do to yourself?" I asked.

"I tried out the folks' liquor cabinet. Want to join me tonight?"

The most alcohol I'd ever had was a half glass of wine along with Thanksgiving dinner, and all that did was clear my sinuses.

"I don't know," I said. "Everybody already thinks I enjoy punching women. I need to stay out of trouble."

"Don't you ever just want to forget about things for a little while?" Milkers asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Then let's forget about it together."

His parents had bowling league that night, so we dug through the endless supply of liquor, taking sips out of each to try to find one that didn't taste like garbage. The first one I grabbed was a bottle of gin. I tipped the bottle back and filled my mouth with liquid pine needles. I swallowed hard and felt the gin travel down toward my stomach, burning the whole way.

Then I saw Milkers take a pull from a bottle of Early Times whisky.

“Hey, that’s what Sal’s always drinking,” I said.

“Have you ever tried it?” Milkens asked.

“Nope,” I said. “Sal always tells me to pour a glass for myself if I want, but I never have.”

“Then we’re drinking in Sal’s honor tonight.” Milkens came back from the kitchen with two cocktail glasses filled with whisky and ice. “To Sal,” he said, clinking my glass.

“To Sal,” I said.

I took a swig and realized I couldn’t swallow any more of that stuff on its own, so Milkens dug some soda out of the refrigerator and mixed it in for me. He kept drinking it straight.

After a second toast to Sal, I sunk into the couch and the whole world melted away. Then it came back in doubles, including Milkens, so I chuckled until my gut started to ache and I ran out of air. And even though Milkens probably had no idea what I was laughing at, when you see anyone like that it can be impossible not to join in, so pretty soon we both cracked up. I tumbled onto the ground and pounded the brown shag carpet with my fist because by then it was the kind of laughter you just can’t stop. Either a year or ten minutes later, I peeled myself off the ground and wiped the tears off my face, but this time the world changed again, moving from doubles to swirls. The room spun, but not in full circles. Whatever I looked at slid away until I refocused.

By the time I realized I was about to puke, it was way too late to make it to the bathroom, so I hauled it into the kitchen. The mixture of tuna casserole and liquor shot

out like my mouth was a fireman's hose. I sprayed the kitchen floor and cabinets before I made it to the sink. I barfed over and over and over, and even when my stomach had emptied, I kept heaving.

The front door opened as I hovered over the sink.

"Sweet Mary," Milkers's mom gasped.

"What in the hell is going on in here, August?" his dad asked.

That was about the extent of the yelling. The Harrisons are the calmest people you'll ever come across. But our parents did talk after that night and decided that they didn't want us spending time together outside of school for a month. Just like that, after pushing us to be friends since the day we were born, they went ahead and pulled us apart.

It was the most ridiculous, idiotic decision made in the history of parental decisions. Plus, they couldn't keep us from hanging out at school. I figured I'd leave it alone and allow our parents to realize how stupid they were being, and in the meantime I put all my energy into preparing for the end of the world.

Y2K was only seventy-nine days away. I figured it would be sort of like the mini version of the Big Bang. Rather than forming the universe, the explosion on January 1st would just be the end of the planet Earth. No big deal in the grand scheme of things, really.

If my mini Big Bang theory turned out to be wrong and the earth didn't blow up and kill everyone immediately, then Y2K would for sure cause so much chaos that everyone would declare war on each other and the human race would die off in World War III anyhow.

Some people said it wouldn't be a big deal and that any glitches would be minor because of all the planning and preparation, but I knew that these people were dead wrong.

I thought that checking in on Sal would just be a summer job, but his daughter called me up to ask if I'd be interested in continuing to do it. She said he refused to live in a nursing home and wouldn't even allow a home health care worker to check in on him from time to time. At ninety-two, he still mowed his own lawn, shoveled his driveway, and drove his burgundy Oldsmobile Ciera.

"He is the most stubborn person you will ever meet in your entire life," Myra said. "He thinks he's failing as a man if he accepts help in any way. He does seem to have taken a liking to you, though. You're the only form of assistance he'll tolerate."

I liked Sal, and most of the time I just talked to him or listened to his stories, so I figured, why not?

When I went to check in on Sal after school, I warned him about end of the world.

"What in sam hell are you talking about, son?" he asked. "And what is Y2K?"

"When computers were first invented, the programmers—"

"Hold on a second," Sal said. "Why don't you go pour me a tall glass of Early Times before you start your story?"

I did what Sal asked even though the smell churned my stomach. I handed over the drink and picked up where I left off.

"Programmers turned four-digit years into two-digit years to save on storage space, so for example, 1975 would be 75. Computers were designed to take for granted

that all two-digit years had 19 before them. So when the year 2000 hits on January 1st, computers all around the globe will think it's 1900. Since they control basically everything that goes on, from banking, to telephones, to water delivery, to government organizations, the Year 2000 problem is going to shatter the foundations of society as we know it, and maybe worse. The world is coming to an end."

Sal took a long, slow drink of his whisky. It was so long and so slow that I thought he was going to ignore what I said.

"Listen, Gil. I don't understand a damn thing you just said, but my world already came to an end twenty-eight years ago, so frankly, I don't give a hoot this time around."

After that we were both quiet for a long time. I wondered what Albert Einstein would've thought up to get us out of this whole mess. I figured he could've come up with some sort of new equation that would blow $E=mc^2$ right out of the water and save us all from the backlash of technology.

"You might be without power for a long time," I blurted out.

Sal looked confused.

"I'm talking about Y2K again. Computers control most of the production and delivery of oil and natural gas, so you need to be ready to do without heat or hot water during the winter months."

"Say, do you mind giving me a refill here?" Sal asked.

I grabbed his glass and headed into the kitchen. While I made his drink, I peeked in his cupboards and refrigerator.

“Don’t plan on having a working fridge, but you can store some stuff in the garage,” I said. “We need to get you stocked up on canned and dried foods. I’ll get you some long-burning candles, too. Do you have a flashlight and batteries?”

“You betcha,” he said. “In one of those drawers.”

I looked just to be sure. The thing about Sal’s place is that all the mess is hidden. In one of his kitchen drawers I found a pile of batteries, old crumpled up bills, a Swiss Army knife, a Purple Heart, three forks (all dirty), a remote control, a pair of reading glasses, and half a bologna sandwich with one big bite taken out of it. The sandwich was so old that the bread was green and the bologna felt like a thin hunk of wood. There was also a whole stack of pictures, some framed and some not, all face down.

There were a lot of tiny nails sticking out of the walls all through the house but only two pictures had been left out in the open. A baby picture of Myra sat on the table right next to Sal’s lazy boy, and another one of her as a grown woman hung in the hallway that lead back to his bedroom.

I found a flashlight in the drawer that was otherwise filled with silverware. It didn’t work, so I threw in some batteries and tried it again.

“Where should we put this flashlight so you know right where it is?” I asked.

“Leave it where you found it,” Sal said. “I know where everything is.”

I took the long way home so I could see more trees. All the yellows mixed with the oranges that faded into reds that bled into the deepest reds of all. It looked like a never-ending forest fire. Thousands of miniature deaths were taking place and melting

into a magnificent display of color. In a week, the fire would begin to fade, and in a month it would be completely snuffed out, brown and dead.

THE BIG BANG

SUMMER 1999

Milkers decided to have a fart contest for the next event. He laid out all the details while we sucked down some milkshakes at Oh Danny Boy's Diner.

"The fourth Moon Wars event is something I like to call Fartfest," Milkers said.

He told us the contest would start at eight o'clock the following night at Ryder Park.

"Since I'm guessing we won't be able to find anyone willing to judge this one, fire will have to tell us who the winner is. Whoever makes the biggest flame using natural gas is the champ."

"I'll bring the lighters," Nutty said.

We could spend up to five dollars at the grocery store on whatever sort of firepower we wanted. When we headed there to buy our supplies, Nutty said, "Pick your poison, boys." He went straight for the aisle with the baked beans, a traditional approach to a fart contest. I went with a more unconventional strategy. I picked up a sack of onions and the cheapest margarine I could find. There's nothing to get the gases flowing like fried onions. Milkers, on the other hand, took his sweet time strolling up and down every aisle of the store. In the end, he came away with a jar of sauerkraut and a family-sized can of split pea soup.

We went back to Milkers's house to cook up the food. Nutty emptied his three cans of country style baked beans into a pot and slowly warmed his bubbly brown slop. I

threw a stick of margarine into a frying pan while I chopped up a half dozen onions. I threw them in the pan and fried them up until I had a giant pile of gut bomb. Milkers decided to mix his kraut with the soup, and it looked and smelled like the most disgusting food combination of all time.

Milkers horsed down his goulash like it was a tasty treat. I'd like to take a gander inside his body sometime. I'd be willing to bet that he has a mini garbage can where a stomach is supposed to be. Nutty ate more slowly, and I figured that was his strategy. He didn't want to waste any good farts before the contest started. I did my best to eat all the onions, but I gave up after it felt like someone was jamming needles into my mid-section.

Milkers tooted the entire way to Ryder Park. It sounded like we were riding on a tugboat. Nutty only let one good one escape, and he yelled at himself the rest of the way because of it. Every time I felt an explosion on the way, I forced it back in. I refused to lose the event, even if my own body had to be the casualty. Once the cramps hit, I had to walk hunched over, and eventually Milkers just threw me over his shoulder and carried me the rest of the way.

"Let's go, Quasimodo," he said as he hoisted me up. I would have appreciated the help more if my nose wasn't hovering so close to his butt and the stench that escaped from it.

When we got to the park, we sat on a bench and waited a couple minutes until it was exactly 8:00 p.m. We flicked our thumbs frantically until a steady flame hung out of our lighters. The thirty seconds that followed sounded like a demented orchestra. I started things off with a fart that first lasted about fifteen seconds, took a short break, and

continued for another ten or so. My steady baseline drum was accompanied by Milkerc's short trumpet blasts and Nutty's saxophone squeals.

After that first rush, things slowed down a bit. I don't need to give the details of every fart, but there were a few highlights. I set the standard with an atomic bomb that set off a mini-mushroom cloud of fire. Nutty had a blast that probably would have topped mine, but he blew the lighter flame out with the force of his wind stream. Milkercs easily farted the most out of the three of us, but they were all scud missiles that couldn't compete with the weapon I unleashed early on.

Most of the excitement happened in the last five minutes of the competition. By that point, I had started taking it easy, figuring it would take a small miracle for either of the guys to top my winner. I could see the pain in their faces. Nutty pushed with all the force he could muster. He came up with a decent fart, but right after it, I saw a worried look take over his face.

"Geez, Nutty, I hope you're wearing a diaper, big guy," I said.

"You're disgusting, Nutty," Milkercs mumbled while he crawled onto the top of a picnic table. "Hey, how much time is left?"

"You've got a minute and twenty seconds," I said.

Milkercs laid on his back, held his legs in the air with one arm behind his knees, and clutched the lighter in ready position with the other. He looked like an overturned crab on steroids. He stayed that way for a while, waiting patiently for a last ditch effort at victory. I stared at my watch and counted down the final twenty seconds out loud. I was interrupted by Milkercs with nine seconds left.

“Hey, fellas, get a load of this,” he said.

His flame didn't just beat mine. It close to doubled it. Milkers became a human flame thrower. We're lucky he didn't light the whole pavilion on fire.

There was a downside to victory for Milkers, though. His flame was so big and powerful that it created a back draft, burning a hole through his shorts and boxers. He suffered a minor burn, too, but toughed it out because he didn't want to try explaining that one to his parents or a doctor.

The walk home was pretty ugly. To my left was a guy who literally crapped his pants, and to my right was an overgrown kid with the middle two inches of his crack showing.

We all needed some time to recover.

THE MAN, THE MYTH, THE LEGEND

SUMMER 1999

I spent the week thinking up ideas for the next event, but it wasn't until I caught a glimpse of Bicycle Bernie on my way to Sal's that the juices really started to flow.

Bicycle Bernie is our town weirdo. Every small town has one. Port Wing has Cucumber Eddie, Bayfield has The Can Man, and Cornucopia has The Woman on the Hill. These are the people that everyone in town has heard of and seen but do their best to avoid. In one way, Bicycle Bernie is the most well-known person in Washburn, but I bet there aren't more than a handful of people who could tell you much more about him than his nickname.

It's always the mysterious people who have the most stories told about them.

You have to sign away all your privacy rights when you choose to live in a place like Washburn because everybody knows everybody. And if people don't know the dirty details of your life, there's a good chance they'll make some up for you. Whenever Mom and Dad pass on some juicy news they say, "I don't repeat gossip, so listen up." At least they're able to joke about it. Most people here don't even realize how much blabbing they do.

I've already heard just about everything you could dream up about Bicycle Bernie, but here's what I know for sure.

He's not a very hairy man, just hairy in all the wrong places. Small bushes of brown hair stick out from his ears and nose, and I'm sure his hands could stay warm

without gloves during winter. Bernie has the hair of a man who has given up on women for good. His wardrobe is made up of flannel shirts, stained sweatpants, and blue jeans filled with holes, even in the crotch. A pair of worn out gray cowboy boots never leave his feet, and when cold weather hits, he also wears a dead muskrat on his head.

Every day, Bernie rides his bicycle up and down the streets and alleyways of Washburn until dark. He always carries a scraggly brown backpack filled with a chess set. Nutty once asked Bernie why he never does anything but ride his bike. Bernie said there are only three good reasons for him to interrupt a good ride: to eat, to sleep, or to play chess.

These days, Bernie only plays chess against himself since no one's willing to take him on. The last one to clash horns with him in a chess match was Rick Smitty, also known as The Brain. He's a junior at Yale and is the only person in the history of Washburn to make it into an Ivy League school. When Bernie won in less than five minutes, Rick demanded a rematch. Bernie won the next game in four moves and called Rick a knucklehead. It was bad enough that Rick got demolished, but being insulted by Bicycle Bernie is probably the fastest way for a high schooler to lose his manhood, which is something Rick had very little of to start with.

For the most part, Bernie just keeps to himself, cruising around town on his old Schwinn three-speed. He sees everything that happens in Washburn, and if anything catches his eye, like a pick-up game of basketball or a group of kids skateboarding, he'll stop and watch for a few minutes before peddling away. When the town is asleep, he heads back to his mom's small brick house to rest up for the next day.

That's about all I know about Bicycle Bernie, but on this day it bugged me that I didn't know more, so I dreamed up his life.

I realized that it could make for an interesting fifth event, so I called Nutty and Milkers and told them the plan. We all had until that Friday to think up a story that explained how Bicycle Bernie got his nickname. We would choose judges Friday night using the first three we could find that weren't a relative or good friend to any of us. After hearing all three stories, the judges would write on a piece of paper who came up with the best one. If there happened to be a three-way tie, we would ask Bicycle Bernie how he got his nickname, and the winner would be the person whose story came closest to the truth.

Friday night we began our search for three eligible judges as we walked to Alley Cat, the local bowling alley.

Nutty showed up with what appeared to be cigarette burn marks on his hand and a massive bruise on his arm that had begun to transform from black to a mixture of purple and yellow. None of us mentioned it, though.

On the way, we bumped into Ricky Gross, a classmate who enjoys eating almost as much as Milkers. We told him about our need for a judge, but he made up some lame excuse that he had to baby-sit for his cousin. We all knew he was lying, so Milkers talked him out of his babysitting gig with two Snickers bars and a stick of gum.

Once we got to the bowling alley, it was easy enough to grab two more judges. There were a dozen people our age standing around and waiting in vain for another Friday night in Washburn to turn into a good time.

Wendy Vanderhosen agreed without putting up a fight. I think she kind of had the hots for Nutty, but it was hard to tell because she's so shy. This choice came close to being thrown out for that reason, but I kept my mouth shut. Ken Crowser was the last judge we picked. He moved here recently, and I don't think he'd really made any friends yet. He looked like he was having about as much fun as a lobster bathing in boiling water. He had a similar facial expression, too. When we told Ken our situation and asked him to be the final judge, you would've thought we offered to give him a million bucks or something.

The judges sat on a bench in the back of the bowling alley, and Milkers, Nutty, and I pulled up three chairs to face them.

Milkers went first, and his story lasted a whole minute. It was clear he hadn't put a whole lot of thought into it. The gist was that Bernie became a bicyclist in his younger days, and after winning a big race his friends started calling him Bicycle Bernie. He tragically injured his leg shortly after that. It ended his racing career, and since then he's never been the same. His wife was a gold-digger, and once she realized he was going nowhere, she took off. Now he just slowly rides around town remembering his better days, too depressed to do much talking.

I went next. Here's what I came up with.

Bernhard Shnorkl was born and raised in Washburn, the only child of his parents, Garnita and Edmund.

Bernie's old man choked to death on a peanut when Bernie was only six years old. It was hard growing up without a man to look up to.

Bernie became an imaginative person, but he had to. With his mom working long hours, he needed to entertain himself. So when Bernie got a bicycle for his seventh birthday, it became much more than just a hunk of metal on wheels. Garnita found the bike at a garage sale. It was the only thing being given away. It was pea green with patches of rust, and the handlebars were crooked. The front tire wobbled back and forth because of a bent rim. Bernie didn't care, though. He was happy to get a new toy. Within five minutes of seeing his present, Bernie had given it a name.

“I think I'll call her Sweet Pea, Mom,” he said.

That summer, the two new friends spent all their days together. Rather than ride the bike, Bernie just walked alongside of Sweet Pea. He talked to her and even fed her. Bernie spoiled Sweet Pea, giving her gumdrops, jellybeans, and even candy bars. But on occasion, Bernie would tape a carrot or an apple to her, saying, “You've got to eat healthy once in a while, Sweet Pea. It's the only way you'll grow up to be big and strong.”

No one ever told Bernie that food could spoil, so there were times when Sweet Pea began to stink and her snacks grew hairy and gray.

Ken Crowser let out a sheepish giggle at this, and before I continued on, I noticed that Ricky and Wendy were both smiling, too.

When Bernie's mom discovered the relationship between the beat up bike and her son, she treated Sweet Pea just as kindly as Bernie did, asking if she'd care for a glass of orange juice or an oatmeal raisin cookie. Eventually, Bernie's mom asked if he wanted to learn how to ride the bike, but Bernie was not interested, so she let it go at that.

One day, Bernie noticed that Sweet Pea wasn't moving with her usual speed. Thinking the problem with Sweet Pea was weakness brought on by a lack of nutrition, he went into the house and looked through the fridge for something good. He walked back out with a smile on his face, knowing he had found the cure to Sweet Pea's sickness. Bernie smothered his lady in barbeque sauce before super gluing the leftover spareribs to the bottom of the seat.

My story was interrupted again with the judges' giggles. Hoping to keep it going, I decided to use different voices for everyone.

"There. Now if Mom's spare ribs don't make you feel any better, I don't know what will," he said.

Bernie saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye, and when he looked up, Mr. Gunderson, the next-door neighbor, towered over him. The gray-haired giant stood tall with his hands on his hips.

"Son, I've watched you and that gull-darned shishkobob play outside all summer long. I've seen you talk to it. I've seen you feed it. Heck, I've even seen you two playing cowboys and Indians. Now, don't you think it's about time you learn how to ride that thing?"

"No."

"Come on now. Let's give it a shot."

Bernie reluctantly agreed, hoping the monster would go away if he did as he was told.

“Alright, that’s more like it. It’ll feel good to ride this puppy rather than walk it around like it’s your girlfriend.”

“Sweet Pea isn’t my girlfriend. Girls have cooties,” Bernie spat back.

The ogre ignored Bernie’s comment. He had known the Shnorkls for quite some time and felt obligated to make sure Bernie didn’t turn into the town joke. He grabbed the bike from Bernie, trying to remember the day when he taught his son how to ride a bike.

Up until that point, I’d been telling the story while sitting down, so I got up and started to act out most of the action, too.

“Now just pay attention. You got to start off with the bike leaning toward you like this when you get on. You don’t want it standing straight up and down. Then you need to keep one foot on the ground while you swing your other leg over like . . . what the heck is . . . is that a meatball sittin on your spokes, boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Gee-whiz. What’s this world coming to? Like I was saying, you flip your leg over like this and you start peddling while you pick your other foot off the ground, and off you go, like a fart in the wind. Give it a shot.”

Bernie fell square on his face, but the blood trickling down his forehead was no cause for the World War II vet to give up hope.

“What’d I tell you? I says you got to start peddling that thing right from the get go. You gotta get that ugly snot-green hunk o’ junk moving or you’re gonna land on your noggin every time. Now saddle up and give it another shot.”

Bernie's mouth started to quiver and his eyes watered, but the tears disappeared as Mr. Gunderson's voice thundered in Bernie's direction.

"Let's go boy. What are you waiting for, Christmas?"

Bernie picked Sweet Pea up with a gentle concern and leaned the bike toward his body like Bigfoot said. He swung his aching leg over the bike and rested his foot on the pedal.

"Alright, now push off with your left foot and pedal like there's no tomorrow."

Bernie did as he was told, and from that moment on, he and Sweet Pea were more inseparable than ever. During that first magical bike ride, Bernie pedaled around the block, gaining confidence and speed every time he circled his house. When his mom called Bernie in for dinner, he ignored her. Eventually she came outside, surprised to see her son actually riding his bike. She called out to him, asking him to stop, and then begging him, but Bernie didn't pay any attention to her.

His mom tried to chase him down nine separate times before lying down across the sidewalk in one last attempt to bring her son to the dinner table. Her sweet little Bernie wouldn't run his mom over, she thought. Bernie raced around the corner, and noticing the human roadblock, peddled around his mom and into the lawn, through the bushes, and back onto the sidewalk. His mom knew when to pick her battles, and this wasn't one of them. She slowly walked back into the house and watched her son through the window, knowing that other seven-year-old children do not ride bikes like that, especially on their first try.

“By golly, Edmund,” Garnita whispered, gazing at the sun as its top peeked out from a cluster of clouds. “Our boy was made to ride a bicycle. Just look at him go.”

Bernie never looked back after that first ride. For the next few years, his mom did her best to make him stay in the neighborhood, but she was busy enough just trying to keep food on the table. As time passed, she realized that anything short of an army wouldn't be able to restrain Bernie, anyways.

Bernie rode Sweet Pea year round through piercing rain, thunderstorms that scared most adults, and wind that would've knocked anyone else right on their keister. During the long winters, Bernie trucked through the snow better than a Ford F-350 with a Turbo Diesel engine.

“Be careful, Bernie,” his mom said time and time again, knowing her words were ignored. “I swear you'd ride right through a tornado if you ever had the chance.”

As the other kids his age built snowmen and threw snowballs at one another, Bernie rode by, taking it all in. Every now and then, the other kids laughed and called Bernie names, but he didn't let it bother him.

In late January that year, Washburn had a snowstorm that lasted close to two full days. Twenty-one inches of snow later, the schools shut down. The snowplows just couldn't keep up with the weather, and the driving conditions were awful. Most of the kids decided to have some fun outdoors. The snow forts were bigger than any other time of winter, and the sledding on Pine Hill was never better.

As usual, Bernie just rode around. He noticed a group of his classmates sledding down Pine Hill, so he stopped to watch.

“Hey Bernie,” Roger yelled, “What are you, stupid or something? Put the bike away already. It’s winter.”

“That sure is a pretty bicycle, Bern,” Jeff teased.

Bernie took off without a word, dodging the snowballs that headed his way. As he rode away, though, Bernie heard a scream. He raced back to find Roger lying at the bottom of the hill, surrounded by all the others. He had broken his leg so badly that part of the bone stuck out through the skin. Roger kept screaming, and finally Kenny took off, saying he’d go get his parents.

“That’ll take too long,” Bernie said, tying the string on Roger’s sled to the back of his bicycle. “It’ll be quicker for me to pull him.”

Bernie’s shortcut got Roger to the hospital quickly and safely, and his broken leg was treated. The local newspaper did a story on it, and that week, Bernie’s picture was plastered on the front cover. The headlines read “Bicycle Bernie Saves the Day,” and from then on, the name stuck. The paper interviewed the doctor that operated on Roger, and he said if it weren’t for Bernie, Roger could have easily gone into shock. An ambulance would have had a heck of a time getting close to Pine Hill because of all the snow.

Bicycle Bernie was a hero at the age of ten. As the years passed, and Bernie graduated from high school, he never left. He remained Washburn’s angel, cruising along on his bicycle every day in case he’s ever needed again.

By the end of my story, I’d gotten so wrapped up in it that it took a bit before I remembered who I was telling it to and why. The judges all gave a grin that seemed to

say job well done, but they didn't actually say much at all. Soon enough, they asked Nutty to start in with his version.

So Nutty brought up the rear with this little ditty.

Once upon a time, there was a kid named Bernie who hated dentists. The nerves in the left side of Bernie's face were permanently damaged when Dr. Bludorn accidentally injected him with a numbing substance that hadn't been diluted. Years later, it was discovered that the mug Dr. Bludorn sipped from while working was filled with gin, not water. That was before lawsuits became trendy, so all Bernie and his mother ever got was a brief, slurred apology from Dr. Bludorn.

The effects of the shot forced Bernie to speak out of the side of his mouth, and when he laughed, only one side of his face rose while the other side sat motionless, like it didn't get the joke.

The teasing that came after the accident changed Bernie from a fun-loving boy to a loner. During recess, a group of kids huddled around Bernie and did their best to get a laugh out of him. It wasn't until the day his classmates started calling him "Crazy Lips" and "Half Laugh" that Bernie realized why they wanted him to get such a kick out of their jokes.

That night, he cried himself to sleep, and in the morning he refused to go to school. Bernie's mom did her best to make him go.

"Bernie, you can't let those little snots upset you," she said. "Just avoid the ones that tease you, and if they won't leave you alone, go right ahead and give one of them a swift kick in the kneecap. Nobody'll bother you after that."

This pep talk didn't get Bernie out of bed, though. When his mom tried to force him to go to school, Bernie repeatedly hit his head against the wall. Being a stubborn woman, it took a couple hundred good thumps before Bernie's mom gave in and let him stay home.

Garnita Shnorkl had to work two jobs to support Bernie and herself. By day, she was a cashier at the local liquor store, and by night she was one of two strippers at Gazungas. When she had a weekend off, Garnita spent her time home schooling her son. Her professions gave Garnita valuable knowledge about the worlds of alcohol and sexuality, so it was only natural for Garnita to focus her lessons around her areas of expertise. Besides, she never was much good at arithmetic or biology.

While other kids learned how to add and subtract, Bernie dealt with percentages. He learned to sort beers in order of their alcohol content.

"Never pay more for some fancy schmancy beer with a low alcohol content," his mom said. "Do you hear me, Bernie? Never."

While other kids memorized the parts of an amoeba, Bernie learned to recite over thirty nicknames for a male erection. His schooling gave Bernie what every kid wants. He had knowledge that could help in the real world. And because he only had class for a few hours a month, Bernie's creativity and imagination were never squashed by the endless hours of sitting in a desk.

When Garnita's husband was stabbed to death following the scandal at the annual Washburn fried pickle eating contest, she had no one else to tell her worries to or share her joys with, so at the age of seven, Bernie became his mom's best friend and therapist.

Every night, she came home at 2:30 in the morning, poured herself a tall glass of vodka, and woke Bernie up.

“How’s my little pumpkin doing tonight?”

“Hey, Mom. I’m kind of tired.”

“I just wanted to come tuck you in. Boy, this town just gets dumber by the day. Guess how many customers bought a case of Bud Light today.”

“Five?”

“Seven stupid idiots bought that garbage when Keystone Ice was sitting right in front of their noses for two dollars less. Do you have any idea how much drunker you can get off a case of Keystone, Bernie? And let me tell you something else, Pumpkin. If that old wrinkly son of a bitch touches me when I’m dancing one more time, I’m going to shove that measly dollar bill right down his throat.”

These nightly ramblings came to be Bernie’s bedtime stories, and every night, he and his mother fell asleep together.

For Bernie’s eleventh birthday, his mom gave him a beat up, three-speed bicycle that she stole on her walk home from work. It was black and blue, and it had the handles that look like ram horns. Bernie became attached to his bike right off the bat. If he had to get somewhere, he biked, and even if he didn’t have to get somewhere, he biked there, too.

During his first ride, Bernie pedaled all through town. The bike took him down Main Street and out onto the highway. He rode on for miles without a single thought bouncing around in his noggin.

Nutty paused and leaned forward. He squinted his eyes, turned his head from side to side, and softened his voice like he was telling a ghost story around a campfire.

When Bernie heard a train whistle, he looked up and spotted the real version of the toy train he'd played with throughout his entire childhood. As the giant metal boxes flew by on the tracks, adrenaline pumped through Bernie's veins. In a strange way, the power of the train made Bernie feel both invincible and insignificant all at once.

He pedaled through a field covered in weeds and overgrown grass until he reached a dirt path that paralleled the tracks. The path was close enough that the enormous sound and wind given off by the train surrounded Bernie until he became a part of its blind power that raced on without an end in sight. He pedaled with the fury of a madman until the final car of the train traveled off ahead of him, leaving him behind.

Bernie slowed down and eventually came to a stop next to a tacky wildlife mailbox shaped like a duck. It was at the end of a long, winding driveway. When he noticed the name Bludorn plastered across that box, Bernie clenched his teeth, slowly raised his arm in the direction of the giant house, and gave Bludorn the bird.

This marked the beginning of a ritual that Bernie would continue every day of his life, no matter how hard mother nature tried to stop him. It was Bernie's own little daily therapy session that wiped away all his anger and allowed him to ride on care-free the rest of the day. When Bernie graduated from high school, he got a job in Iowa but only lasted a few months before returning to Washburn. Some say the reason he moved back is because he couldn't function without his therapy.

Over time, everyone got used to seeing Bernie on his bike. People called him Bicycle Bernie because of it, and the name stuck. I even heard a rumor that he had his name legally changed to Bicycle Bernie Shnorkl.

To this day, Bernie has never defeated the train in a race. But there are worse things in life than being beaten by a train.

I had to admit, Nutty's story was entertaining. It wasn't just the material he thought up, but the way he told it.

Ken didn't waste any time writing his vote down, so I knew I couldn't count on him. I could tell that Ricky was thinking hard. He even scratched his head at one point. Before Wendy wrote her vote down, she felt the need to tell us that she enjoyed each story and was glad we asked her to be a part of the competition. I was just about dying from suspense, but I thanked her and flashed a smile, doing my best to bring out my dimples. For some weird reason, girls love dimples.

Wendy took charge after the judges met in a huddle. It was so strange because she's usually the quietest person in a room.

"Nutty, Gil, Milkers, it is with great pleasure that I announce tonight's winner," she said. "By the count of two votes to one, Nutty is your champion."

I'll never know whether Wendy voted for Nutty because she was gaga over him or because of the story he told. The loss left a bad taste in my mouth. I didn't want to show it, but I was as sour as milk in the sun.

The strange thing was, though, Nutty didn't look much better off. He didn't smile, or give a fist pump, or even rub in his win with a comment or two. He was pretty quiet the rest of the night.

NOVEMBER 1999

In gym class, Miss Okerman told us we were starting a unit in wrestling. We even worked on some moves right off the bat. She asked me to be her demonstrating dummy, so I walked onto the mat and she proceeded to have her way with me.

“Come on, Gil, are you a man or a mouse?” she yelled after throwing me down.

She has forearms the size of my thighs, and I can only dream of having a beard as thick as hers, so next to her, I felt like a mouse for sure.

“A man,” I said.

“Then act like it, and put up a fight this time,” she growled.

She pulled a single and double-leg takedown and then slung me over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry before telling me to get off the mat because I was too much of a “weak tit.”

That didn’t matter, though, because it was game night and I knew that no matter what went wrong during the day, I’d be able to watch Milkers play ball later on. He got out enough aggression for both of us.

In the final game of the season, the Washburn Geese were up against the Cornucopia Tigers. Our mascot put us at a disadvantage before the game even started. It’s too bad we don’t have a mascot that can rip your head off like a panther or lion. Even a mean animal would be good, even if it’s not big, like a bobcat or a badger. But we’re stuck with the Geese, and the only thing that makes people nervous about geese is all the turds they leave behind like land mines waiting to be stepped on.

Milkers was the first freshman to start on the varsity football team in school history. I was used to seeing him do whatever ever he wanted out on the field. He's always been bigger than everyone else, and hiding underneath all that fat is some real power. Apparently, he's not big enough in some people's minds. The coach's main advice to him so far has been, "Keep eating. You should be crapping three times a day."

Milkers's football skills catapulted him into the world of popularity. He started hanging out with the football players more and more. The seniors didn't trip him in the halls, or knock his books out of his hands, or call him names. They treated him like a fellow senior. He even went to a party at Dave Becker's place.

"How can you stand that guy?" I asked him once.

Milkers knew the whole story about Dave shoving me in that locker better than anyone.

"He's not all bad," Milkers said. "Plus, he buys me chew whenever I run out."

Minutes before the start of the game, I headed up to the top of the bleachers and sat alone, but even that wasn't enough. I could tell that some people still inched away from me like I had the plague. I had the woman-beater disease, and nobody wanted to risk catching it.

After a while, though, Toad Kloppenhower walked up to my hideout and sat next to me. Maybe he felt immune. For the first time in my life, I was glad to see Toad.

"What the hell are you doing up here in the nosebleeds, Sanders?" he asked.

I don't know if he was that clueless or if he just thought it would be helpful to pretend that the whole school didn't hate me.

“No bad seat in the house,” I lied.

The game turned out to be a snoozer. Washburn basically put it away by the end of the first half, and the Geese took a big dump on the Tigers, winning 31-6.

The next day, I decided to sit by Toad at lunch, which officially bumped my status down to grade A, top-of-the-line butt-sniffer. I couldn't go any lower, but it sure felt better than sitting alone.

Things started to look up a bit in Keyboarding class when I pulled a Sherlock Holmes and discovered a carefully hidden secret. When I entered the classroom, I saw the same thing as always. Mr. Jenkins polished off another cup of coffee, and the second after he took his final gulp, he began class and put us to work with some typing warm-ups.

I was bored even quicker than usual, so I thought I'd ask if I could get a drink of water. I raised my hand, but it sat in the air unnoticed for so long that I couldn't hold it up any more. Even my fake coughs were ignored.

So I walked up to his desk.

He didn't see me at first, and when I noticed it I couldn't believe my eyes, so I slowed my walk down to watch some more. Seeing that little speck of a man sitting in a big office chair looked funny. His feet didn't even reach down far enough to sit flat on the ground. I stared as his one pointer finger hovered over the keyboard in an endless search for the next letter. It was a small victory every time he finally landed on the key. Typing an entire sentence must take him an eternity.

Mr. Jenkins, the keyboarding instructor, the man paid to teach a classroom full of students how to type, is a hunter and pecker.

When he finally looked up and saw me staring at him, Mr. Jenkins got all flustered. He had this habit of taking his glasses off and rubbing his whole face with his hand, but I scared him so bad that he worked his face over like a masseur. Even though he's a tiny man, the loads of coffee always turned him into a force much larger than his body size let on. He rattled off his words quickly and loudly.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "You aren't allowed up here. You need to raise your hand, and then I will call on you."

"I raised my hand for about five minutes, and my arm was about to fall off," I said.

"What do you need, Mr. Sanders?" he asked.

He was so snippy about it that my need suddenly changed from a drink of water to a keyboarding lesson.

"Well," I said, scratching my head. "I'm really having a hard time typing the word pecker for some reason. Could you show me how it's done? I think it will help to watch the form of an expert."

At first, he hoped I somehow hadn't noticed his typing form, but by this point it had dawned on him that I discovered his secret.

"Class," Mr. Jenkins said loudly. "Is there anyone in here who can show Mr. Sanders how to type correctly? He seems to be having some problems."

“No, Mr. Jenkins,” I said. “I’m sure there are others who type better than I do, but I’d like to learn from the best.”

“I’m in the middle of something, here. Go sit down and have one of your classmates give you a demonstration,” he said.

“If you already have a document up on your screen, you could just show me real quick if you don’t mind,” I suggested.

“Mr. Sanders, take a seat, please. If you need to have your ears cleaned out I’m sure Principal Knox could help out with that.”

Mr. Jenkins raised his voice on that one, so it got a few ooos from the rest of the class.

“I’d like to offer you a friendly wager, Mr. Jenkins.” Now I raised my voice to match his in volume, letting everyone in on our battle. “I hereby challenge you to a typing contest. If you win, I’ll take a month of detention and an ear cleaning from Principal Knox. But, if I, a rookie in the world of keyboarding, happen to take down the reigning champ, all you have to do is show me how to correctly type the word pecker, and I will get on with my daily assignment.”

Mr. Jenkins yanked his glasses off and rubbed his face so hard that I couldn’t believe it was still attached to his skull by the end of it.

“Out of here, now,” he thundered, so I walked out of the room.

I’m not positive, but I think that encounter at least temporarily moved me above the realm of butt-sniffer.

Once I left the room, I kept walking. Before I knew it, I walked out the main doors and right off school grounds.

I couldn't get the song "Blue Skies" out of my head, so I thought about the way Nutty used to whistle it all the time. When I finally asked him what song he was whistling, he acted like I shot him right through the heart.

"You're killing me," he said, clutching his chest and crumpling to the ground. "Milkers, help him out, buddy."

When Milkers said he didn't have a clue, Nutty laid still on the ground, playing dead. Finally, he got back up on his feet.

"Guys, we need to have an emergency intervention here," Nutty said. "From now on, we're going to have cultural awareness day once a week. You guys are going to come over to my house and listen to some amazing music until you're no longer social morons."

"You never told us who sings that song," I reminded him.

"Everybody and their dog have done the song, but nobody does it like Ol' Blue Eyes."

We must have given him a blank look.

"Lesson one. Frank Sinatra's nickname is Ol' Blue Eyes. The best version of 'Blue Skies' was done by Frank Sinatra along with Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra."

So here I was, walking right out of school and singing "Blue Skies" real quietly, trying not to move my lips. I didn't want the people driving by to think I was talking to myself. After singing it a couple of times through, I happened to look up from the cracks

in the sidewalk and noticed there wasn't a cloud up there. The sky was a blue so bright that I couldn't look for long.

It sounds strange, but it felt like Nutty was with me there for just a minute, kind of spread out across the sky and at the same time right there next to me, whistling along. It felt good to think that he might be a part of something so blue that it hurts to look at and something so big that it doesn't have a beginning or an end.

By the time I reached Sal's house, I stopped and stared at it for a second, realizing that I never once actually thought about walking there.

I knocked on his door, but there was no answer, so I pounded. I heard Sal's voice, just barely, through the door.

"Come on in, bartender," he shouted from his chair. "I'll take a whisky on the rocks. Pour yourself a little something, too, if you please."

When I poured Sal's Early Times over the pile of ice cubes, they made the same noise as a bowl of Rice Krispies being covered in milk.

"Sal," I said, handing over the drink, "what did you mean that time you said your world ended a long time ago?"

Sal sat in his raggedy green recliner just like always. He looked at me hard like he couldn't decide whether or not to let me in on a secret. After that, he allowed himself to think even longer by taking a monster gulp of whisky. I'm not positive, but I think his eyes got a little bit shiny during that drink, like teardrops were trying hard to form in eyes that dried up many years ago.

“Another time, eh?” was all he said, so I dropped it and started to think of what else I needed to do to save Sal from a surefire death. If there wouldn’t be an instant explosion when the New Year hit and the world slowly fell apart instead, he’d be helpless.

I figured walkie-talkies were a must. I had already picked a pair of them up and left them at his place, but I hadn’t checked to see if he knew how to use them. I pulled them off the kitchen counter and handed one over. Rather than ask why I handed him a walkie-talkie, Sal slipped in a joke as usual.

“Did you grow since the last time I saw you?” he asked.

“I saw you less than a week ago, so I doubt it,” I said, knowing where this was going.

“How tall are you anyways?”

“Last time I checked, I was about five foot six.”

“They sure pile it high these days,” Sal said with a smirk.

I gave him a little courtesy laugh even though I’ve heard that joke plenty of times. Then I told Sal we were having a practice drill. I explained the code words and told him to say “asteroid” if he was dying and needed immediate help, “eclipse” if he needed help but it wasn’t an emergency, “Milky Way” if he needed me to bring him some food or drink, and “nebula” if he just wanted to chat. I showed him the power switch and the button he’d need to hold while talking.

“Are you sure you’re not blowing things out of proportion with this whole millennium bug thing you keep jabbering about?” he asked.

Nobody knows what's going to happen, but I just have this horrible feeling in my gut.”

“You sure it ain't constipation?” Sal asked. “I have some prune juice if you need it.”

I walked back into his den and shut the door. The walkie-talkies worked just fine, but Sal couldn't remember any of the code words.

I opened a desk drawer hoping to find a piece of paper, but the only thing in there was a handful of framed pictures turned face down. I knew I shouldn't snoop around, but I figured that if I happened to catch a glimpse of a picture or two, that would just be part of the hunt.

I didn't find any paper, but I did see a much younger Sal standing next to a beautiful woman with wavy black hair. Sal had this look in his eye like he was about to conquer the world. He looked taller, probably because time and years of back-breaking work hadn't curved his spine yet. He stood straight, shoulders pulled back, and he had a full head of dark hair. He was skinny, like he is now, but he looked wiry and strong. Sal's face had the same chiseled jaw line and twinkling eyes that he's hung onto, but he was cleanly shaven, something I almost never saw when I visited. He had one hand on his hip and his other arm wrapped around the back of the lady. She was just a hair shorter than Sal, and her smile took over the entire photo. They looked like the happiest couple on earth.

“Did you get lost back there or what?” the walkie-talkie asked.

The voice made me jump. I put the pictures back the way they were and shut the drawer.

“Yeah. I mean no,” I said. “I was looking for a piece of paper so I could write our code words down for you.”

“Come back out here so I can tell you where to find some,” Sal said. “I’m sick of talking into this machine.”

I wrote the words down on a scrap of paper and posted it on the refrigerator.

“I need your help,” I said. “My friend. Benny.” I hadn’t talked about Nutty since it happened, and it was hard to spit the words out. “He killed himself.”

“I heard about that,” Sal said. “The two of you were good friends from what I understand.”

“Best friends. The thing is, I’m trying to figure out why he did it, and I’m running out of time.”

“I see. I suppose understanding someone else’s pain is no easy task.”

“No, it’s not. But I think I know why he did it. His dad hit him. His dad hit him a lot.”

“Did Benny tell you this?”

“He never wanted to talk about it.”

“I suppose everyone has a thing or two they’d rather not discuss.”

“He’d talk about his mom instead,” I said. “She’s the reason he knew so much about music. When they lived out in California, Rose worked as a backup singer but was starting to perform in some smaller clubs on her own.”

At this point, it wasn't hard to spit the words out anymore. They came tumbling out in a rush, and Sal's silence egged me on.

“When Rose sang at home, though, it was always real quiet, and if anyone came into the room she'd stop,” I said. “She was always a little embarrassed, or else it was something so private that it couldn't be shared. Nutty said that when he was young and he heard her singing, he'd always hide around the corner, or in the closet, or behind the couch so he could listen for as long as possible. And once in a while, when his Dad had to work into the night, Nutty said his mom would bring him and his younger brother to her shows.”

Sal looked at me, waiting for me to continue, so I did.

“On the way to one gig they smashed into a truck. It killed his baby brother and injured Rose's vocal cords. Nutty told me that his brother lost everything and that his mom lost even more.”

I told Sal everything I knew. All Nutty ended up with was a minor concussion, and the trucker didn't even have a scratch. Nutty's mom stopped singing, even to herself. Her voice was dead. Instead, she had music playing around her constantly. Most of the time, she'd turn it up real loud and just sit in her rocking chair, lost in it. Nutty said he'd spot an album cover lying out and learn who had been blaring through the house, but every now and then his mom would talk about the music or tell him to come over and listen along with her. He learned little by little, and since Rose loves all kinds of music, he learned about it all.

Sal got up out of his recliner and walked over to the huge living room window. He stared outside while I kept on talking.

“Nutt used to lend me his tapes and CDs. He said I needed them way more than he did. I still had Nirvana and Nick Drake when he died, and then Rose gave me the rest of his collection. She said he’d want me to have them. She said that Leo and her are a bit old-fashioned, and they wouldn’t listen to those new fangled things. It was weird to hear her call tapes and CDs new fangled things. It was even stranger to hear her husband’s name because I always thought of him as more of a monster than an actual person.”

I looked over at Sal again. He still faced the window, and I wondered if he’d heard a word I had said.

“Maybe you ought to have a talk with Mr. McNutt,” Sal suggested.

I didn’t think I could stand to see that guy again, and I definitely didn’t think I could talk to him.

“Maybe,” I said.

DECEMBER 1999

There is one good thing about the world coming to an end. When you think that New Year's Eve is your last day to live, along with everyone else's, you get to do the things you wouldn't even think of trying to pull off any other day of your life.

I decided that Sal was right. Sort of. I needed to have a talk with Mr. McNutt, but not the kind of talk Sal was thinking.

First, I blasted Prince's "1999" about ten times straight to get pumped up and to remind myself that I was running out of time.

Then I went to the McNutt's house to get back at Nutty's dad for all the rotten things he ever did to my friend. I knew I couldn't get even, but I had to at least pay him back a little bit. I talked Milkers into coming along with me. When we got to the house, Rose told us her husband was out for a drink, so we headed to The Thirsty Camel.

I didn't stand a chance in a fight with much of anyone, so I figured if Milkers came along just to protect me after I threw a punch that everything would be just fine. We stepped into the bar, and that killer song, "People Are Strange," blared throughout the smoky, dark room. It made sense that the volume was cranked because the people that stop at The Thirsty Camel aren't looking to do much chatting.

A mixture of peanut shells and cigarette butts littered the floor, and as we entered, the ground made a crunch that shook my whole body.

I walked up to Nutty's dad and stared at him. Tiny pools of spilled liquor and sour beer turned the bar counter into a bog. After a long wait, he looked up, met my eyes, didn't react, and turned back to the counter.

On the wall, an ancient neon sign flashed Old Style on and off.

"This is for Nutty," I said, balling my hand up into a fist.

"What?" he mumbled.

"I said this is for Nutty," I yelled.

"Who's Nutty?"

"Benny," I yelled.

"Huh?" he yelled back.

Just then Milkerc walked up and popped him right in the jaw. I'm not sure if he thought I was wimping out or if seeing Nutty's old man in person made him decide he had to get some payback, too. For whatever reason, though, Milkerc landed a punch that knocked Mr. McNutt right off the barstool. The crack drowned out the music for just a second, and then the sound of crushed peanut shells played background to Jim Morrison's wailing voice. I pictured the time Nutty first introduced me to The Doors.

Mr. McNutt had a steady line of blood moving from his lip down to his shirt, and it turned his green sweatshirt a whole new color. He didn't get up and try to fight back, and nobody else in the bar made a move. I wanted something more to happen, so I spit on him. It landed right on his face, and I watched the blood mix with my saliva. I wished I had asked Milkerc for some of his chew beforehand. Then I really could've gotten him.

Still nothing happened, so we walked out like a couple of outlaws.

That was the first time I'd ever seen someone throw a punch up close like that. I'd seen a couple of fights before, but only the kind that are more like a wrestling match where neither person wants to take it a step further. You know something's wrong with the world when a guy like Milkens turns into the one who wants to throw a punch.

That night, I couldn't stop thinking about the way Mr. McNutt laid on the dirty bar floor with that same far-off look he always had. His wife had cancer, he lost one kid a long time ago, and then he lost Nutty on top of it all. I guess in a sad way, it made sense that he didn't care enough to wonder why he just got punched in the face.

PRICK OF A PEA

SUMMER 1999

In the middle of the week, Nutty told us we'd need a peashooter for the weekend. It was a good thing he gave us a heads up because mine was buried in the back of my closet. It was a plain old everyday straw, but it was just the right size.

We used to run around and nail each other with those things, but when Toad Kloppenhower took a shot to the eye, we put the shooters away and haven't used them since. Toad still has to wear this contraption that's part eyeglasses, part protective goggles. His eye got a little better, but it still wanders around once in a while.

On Friday, we met up at Ryder Park so Nutty could lay out the plan for the next day. Milkers and I sat at the park for a half hour waiting for Nutty to show. The horseflies were running wild that day, so we decided not to wait around any longer. As we walked off, Milkers let out a yelp and grabbed the back of his head. Turns out the horseflies were peas. We heard a nearby bush laughing at us, and Nutty hopped out.

"I thought I was going to have to poke an eye out for you guys to realize what was going on," Nutty said. "Milkers, the back of your noodle makes a great bulls-eye. I knew I couldn't miss if I tried."

Milkers struggled to think of something clever, but when nothing came to him in a few seconds he had to spit something out.

"What goes around comes around," Milkers said.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before,” Nutty said. “Enough horsing around now. We man our post at 0500 hours, and you two yahoos don’t know the plan yet.”

“What time is that?” Milkers and I blurted out together.

“Five in the morning. We need to get set up before the first golfers hit the course. Remember how you guys told me you used to climb that big maple tree behind the first tee box and make animal noises in people’s backswings?”

“Until Old Man Samburg threatened to shoot us with his bb gun,” I said.

“Yeah, well, Old Man Samburg’s not around anymore,” Nutty said. “I’ve done a little investigating. That new groundskeeper sounds like he’s just as crabby, but he’s not crazy enough to start shooting at noises.”

Nutty was excited about that next day. He even had Milkers and me pumped up enough that we didn’t mind waking up at the butt crack of dawn. The goal of the sixth event was to make someone hit the worst possible drive off the first tee using only a peashooter. We would each pick one golfer and could take as many shots as we wanted. The first person to call a golfer was the only one who could shoot at that person.

That next morning we got together before the sun had even woken up. Milkers brought donuts and a baggie full of sunflower seeds. Nutty had the peas. We walked through the woods behind the first tee to get to our spot. That way no one would be able to say they spotted some suspicious looking characters at the course if our day somehow turned into a disaster. We probably beat the clubhouse workers and grounds crew out there anyhow, but sometimes it helps to be prepared for the worst.

We got to the tree, and Milkers realized that the extra forty or fifty pounds he packed on since the last time we climbed it made things a bit more interesting. He snapped one branch and almost came tumbling down, but he hung on and eventually found a nice thick branch to call his home. Nutty and I followed, checking out every spot to make sure there was a clear shooting lane. I ended up on a branch close to Milkers, and Nutty was above us. We shot the bull and ate plenty of sunflower seeds. We even started warming up our peashooters to make sure we were sighted in. The three of us were snipers just waiting to take some poor shmuck out.

The first shmuck who strolled onto the course that morning was Mr. Gert, a cheery sort of guy who works at the bakery. I'd be in a good mood, too, if I was always around donuts. He was decked out in his 70s plaid golf pants and skin tight collared golf shirt. You could even tell that his clubs were from that era. I thought I was in a time warp.

"Dibs," Milkers whispered, not wasting any time.

He carefully handed over the bag of sunflower seeds and picked up his peashooter. As Mr. Gert loosened up, Milkers started Operation Bombs Away. Mr. Gert bent over to touch his toes and Milkers pegged him. This drew a casual butt scratch, but nothing more. Mr. Gert moved onto an arm stretch, and after a couple of quick misses, Milkers tagged him on the forearm. Mr. Gert made a shooping motion like there was a mosquito hovering around his arm. During his countless warm-up swings, Milkers fired away, hitting Mr. Gert twice in the leg, once in the shoulder, once in the back, and once on the forehead.

By the end of his warm-ups, Milkens had the guy pretty flustered. The forehead shot was almost too good. That one had Mr. Gert looking around in every direction, partly to find out what kept stinging him and partly to make sure no one was watching. It was like seeing the reaction of someone who stubbed their foot in the ground, almost biffed it, caught their balance, and then played it off like they meant to start jogging while also glancing around to see how many people noticed what really happened.

Milkens loaded his peashooter and waited for the money shot while Mr. Gert shoved his tee in the ground. A couple practice swings later, Mr. Gert stood over the ball and began his marathon wobble. This was a dead giveaway of a worm-burning, club-throwing, foot-wedging golfer. It went right in line with the plaid pants. After a lifetime had gone by, Mr. Gert brought the club back, and Milkens launched his last shot.

“Thwack,” said the pea. I swear I heard it. Milkens got him right in the Adam’s apple. Saying it was a clutch shot would be an understatement. Mr. Gert hit a pathetic drive off the toe of his club. It dribbled sideways about twenty yards. Again, he looked around hoping no one else had woken up as early as he had to come out to Washburn Country Club. He grabbed his bag, itched his neck, and walked to his ball with his tail between his legs.

Milkens had a solid start, so Nutty and I knew we had to be picky with our targets. We let a couple of early morning golfers and a foursome slide through unbothered. Spitting matches with the sunflower seeds helped pass the time, but when the next group came to the tee, I was ready to make my move. I called my target before the next

threesome even came into sight. There was no mistaking Mrs. Dunbar's laugh. It even scared the birds right out of a nearby tree.

I didn't recognize the ladies she was with, but I'm guessing they were friends from out of town. The only things they stretched on the tee were their mouths. They talked about gardening, a chicken casserole and every single ingredient that goes into it, and the cute painter one of them just hired. All that before any of them even bothered to swing a club.

I had a different strategy than Milkers's machine gun approach. I decided I'd try to hit one of the friends during Mrs. Dunbar's backswing. I hoped to get a yelp or a scream that would distract Dunbar. Before they started teeing off, I hit the one friend and then the other to see which one was jumpier. The pea didn't even faze the redhead. The tall blonde was definitely the squirmier of the two.

The two friends went first, and they both knew what they were doing. I guess they didn't need to stretch after all. Seeing her friends' drives had me worried that Mrs. Dunbar was a good golfer, too. She pulled out her driver, took a quick practice swing, and stood over her ball. Just before Dunbar started her swing, I aimed and fired a fastball at her friend.

I hit the lady's ear right as Mrs. Dunbar pulled the club away. By the time she started geeking out, it was too late into Dunbar's swing for her to stop, but early enough that she was definitely distracted.

The stars were aligned. It was the best shot I've ever had in my life. You can count darts, basketball, throwing snowballs at a stop sign, or whatever else takes accuracy.

The blond lady hopped around the tee box, swiping at her ear. "Ahhh. Ewwww. Get it offa me. Uhhhaaaahhhh. Get it off," she screamed. "It's a bug. A spider. Get it out. Ewww." Her babbling turned into a whine and she almost started to cry. I wished I had a couple of tranquilizer darts instead of peas at that point, but after a while, she calmed down and her friends joked that the only thing in her ear was a bunch of wax.

Dunbar pulled out of the swing because of the noise but still made solid contact. The ball slammed into a tree just off the fairway and came straight back, almost hitting the redhead. It came to rest in the tall grass behind the ladies. It was a drive of about negative ten yards.

After all that excitement, we had a long wait before Nutty was ready to pull the trigger. He even passed on Booba, the man famous for drunkenly crashing a golf cart while cruising down the hill on the fifth hole. Sure enough, he had his flask handy on the first tee and it couldn't have been later than nine in the morning at that point. When Nutty let the Dickensons pass by, I thought he must've been either stupid or asleep. They are the most awkward couple I've ever seen in my life. They can't even walk without tripping over each other's feet.

"This is the one," Nutty whispered when we saw Coach Watkins step up.

"Don't do it," Milkens pleaded.

"Listen to him, Nutty," I added.

“Be quiet or we’re going to get caught,” Nutty said. “I didn’t tell you guys who not to shoot at.”

Earl Watkins is the middle school gym teacher and basketball coach. At the start of our first eighth grade practice, he walked into the gym just as Nutty attempted a 360 dunk using Squeak’s back for a boost.

“Everybody on the line,” Watkins screamed. He whipped his clipboard across the gym. “We’re gonna run for the next half-hour since McNutt thinks he’s a circus clown.”

He called us all names while we ran, and he screamed at us to pick up the pace no matter how fast we moved. We ran for our lives, and he threatened that if everyone didn’t give it their all that we’d keep on running for the entire practice. Following our punishment, Watkins waited for the pukers to finish emptying their stomachs and join the group so everyone could witness his next move.

“Get the hell out of my gym, McNutt. I don’t need any clowns on my team.”

I thought Nutty would snap, but all he did was dropkick a basketball into the bleachers and walk out of the gym.

Above us, Nutty loaded his weapon and prepared for war. Coach Watkins cracked his neck, lifted the club above his head to stretch his arms for about two seconds, and he was set. He had probably already worked out at least once by this time of the day. He bent over to put his tee in the ground when Nutty pelted him with a solid butt shot. Watkins jumped up, turned around, and glared at the woods behind him. While he did this, Nutty drilled him right in the stomach. Watkins’s shirt was so tight that it couldn’t have absorbed much of the impact. He scratched his stomach and squinted even harder at

the woods. Nutty missed with his next shot, but that was probably a good thing since Watkins was basically staring us down.

A drop of sweat trickled down my forehead. My heart pounded against my chest, and because of it, I felt more alive than ever before.

Coach Watkins turned around and walked up to his ball. In mid-swing, Nutty gave him a stinger in the calf, and he whiffed. Nutty let out a little laugh, and that was all it took for Hound Dog Watkins to sniff us out. His mouth curled into a scowl, and he walked straight back into the woods. He looked in every direction, and right when I thought he might forget to look up, he spotted us.

“Get down you bunch of punks,” he yelled.

“Nah, maybe later, Earl,” Nutty said.

He knew that the ultimate form of disrespect is to call a coach by their first name.

“Is that you, McNutt? I should’ve known. It takes a real woman to ruin a sport rather than play it.”

“Why don’t you go kick your ball around the course and leave us alone?” Nutty asked. “We can all see that you won’t actually be hitting it with your club.”

“What are the two of you doing hanging out with a loser like McNutt?” Coach asked. “He’s just a sinking ship looking to bring everyone else down with him. Get down from the tree. I want to talk to you fellas.”

“No thanks, Coach,” Milkers said.

“Yeah, we’re fine up here,” I added.

“You boys can come down or I can climb up there and bring you down the hard way.”

“Come on up,” Nutty offered.

“You got it,” Coach said.

He grabbed hold of a branch and was going to town like an old pro. Nutty started shooting, and before I had a chance to think, I joined in. After Nutty and I had gotten a couple of good shots in, Milkers helped out, too. I know from experience how much it stings when you’re getting pegged with peas close range, but Coach ignored the pain. He just muttered how much fun he was going to have when he caught us. He got stuck in a tricky place where your only option is to hang onto a branch with one hand and swing over to another like a bigger version of playground monkey bars. Coach stopped for a second, and I could see the wheels turning.

“You remember kicking me off the team?” Nutty asked.

“Best move I ever made,” Coach said.

Nutty’s eyes grew wide.

“Your revenge is about to be served on a platter with extra peas,” Nutty said.

“Milkers, you go for the head shot. Gil, you and me are going for his hands.”

Coach’s jibber jabber got a little louder as he stood in that spot, taking heavy fire and preparing to make his move.

“No backing down now, boys,” Nutty yelled. “This is our last stand.”

When Coach’s feet left the branch, I fired a pea right at his hand. Nutty’s shot missed its target but looked like it hit Coach in the neck. Milkers hit him square in the

forehead, and the combination was too much to handle. Coach lost his balance, missed the other branch, and fell backwards. He landed on his back, and the fall knocked the wind out of him. He sat there in silence for a solid minute.

Once he could breathe normally again, he got up, grabbed his bag, and continued on with his round of golf without telling anyone what happened. He has a Wild West mentality. He handles things his own way and comes up with his own cruel punishments, partly because he enjoys it and partly because he doesn't trust anyone else to do the job. Coach hates dealing with students' parents, and I've heard him complain more than once that the cops in this town don't know what they're doing.

We knew we'd have to deal with Watkins again, but it didn't matter that day. We sent Watkins on his way, and there was nothing he'd be able to do to take that victory away from any of us.

As soon as Coach was out of sight, we climbed down and headed home. On the walk back, Nutty argued that he and I tied since neither of our golfers moved the ball forward. I don't think he even believed his own argument. It didn't take a whole lot to convince him that I'd won.

The score was all knotted up at two events each.

SLAP BALLS, SOMBREROS, AND SWARBRICK

SUMMER 1999

Milkers decided to play slap ball for the seventh event, with a few variations. Slap ball has been played in the halls of Franklin Middle School for years. It's a backhanded slap to the family jewels of an unsuspecting victim. These quick flicks of the wrist were usually given in the hallways between class periods. Every time the teachers tried to put the clamp down, the slaps just became better hidden until it all blew over and the teachers didn't give a rip any more. I don't know how it got started, and to be honest, I don't want to know. If none of us are able to have kids later on down the road, I guess we'll know the reason.

There are some courtesy rules, but with valuable jewels on the line, rules tend to become a bit fuzzy. First off, closed fist punches were out of bounds. Anyone caught using a closed fist would probably be tarred and feathered, or worse. And second, if excessive force was used, the attackee had the right to retaliate with multiple rapid-fire shots.

The rules for the event were pretty simple. The three of us faced off against each other, every man for himself. Each person to successfully land a slap ball got to make up a rule, within reason, that had to be followed in order to be considered a true slap ball from that point on.

“After a new rule is made,” Milkers said, “you have twenty-four hours to dish out a slap ball. Otherwise, you’re gonzo. When one is landed, the clock starts fresh for everyone. Winner is the last one standing.”

Milkers paused, and Nutty gave him a good one.

“Ugh. What gives?” Milkers asked, hunched over.

“What do you mean, what gives? I just nailed you, and now I’m trying to think of a rule.”

A debate followed about who got to decide when an event began. I think Nutty knew all along he’d have to give in, which he did. After Milkers somewhat recovered, he told us the event would officially begin in t-minus fifteen minutes, and he threw in one last-minute rule to scare Nutty away from any immediate slap ball attempts.

“A blocked shot means an automatic loss,” he said.

Milkers counted the seconds down to the official start of the event, and we all went on guard. The night was pretty uneventful for a few hours. We walked around town and popped in and out of the usual hangouts.

We were paying for our shoe rentals at the bowling alley when Nutty made his move. He waited until the second Milkers handed his money over to the cashier. Milkers doubled over, and the cashier fumbled his money. She probably had no clue what happened because the counter was higher than our beltlines.

“And for the first rule,” Nutty said, “the gentleman handing out a slap ball attempt must wear a sombrero.”

We all still had the cheap sombreros we made in Art for the end of the year fiesta in our eighth grade Spanish class. Since none of us had our sombreros handy and none of us wanted to make up some lame excuse for taking off to grab it, the night ended after a few games of bowling.

I couldn't fall asleep that night, so after a couple of hours I stopped kidding myself, threw on some jeans, grabbed my sombrero, and headed out the door. Even though Milkens had already been hit that day, his house was closer, so that was his bad luck. Sometimes champions have to be a little ruthless to make it to the winner's circle.

I didn't really have a plan, to be honest. When I made it to his house, I threw my sombrero in the bushes and tapped on his window, doing my best to come up with something, anything, to tell him. It took a while to get him up because Milkens is probably as good a sleeper as anyone. I'd say he's right up there with a grizzly bear. He goes into hibernation every time he shuts his eyes.

"Milkens, get out here," I said.

"What are you doing here?" Milkens asked after he finally opened his window.

"I've got a plan," I said. "I think we should go get Nutty right now. Catch him off guard, you know?"

"What? What are you talking about, man?"

"I'm talking about the event you just made up, you big boob. Grab your sombrero and get out here. We're going to attack Nutty."

"Just hang on a sec," Milkens said.

I grabbed my sombrero and ran over to the bushes by his front door. It was dark out, and I knew he wouldn't be looking in my direction when he came out. Plus, from the bushes I was within arms length of where he'd be standing. I heard the door knob rattle, so I threw my sombrero on. Milkers stumbled out the door, and I lunged forward and tried to nail him. I don't know if it was the bad lighting or the fact that Milkers doesn't walk straight after waking up, but my attempt failed miserably. I banged my knee against the cement porch and hit Milkers's thigh with the back of my hand.

It took a minute for Milkers to piece together what had happened. Eventually, he said, "I see what's going on here."

"Alright, you caught me. I missed. Now let's go get Nutty. We're not going to be able to get that kid during daylight. He's always on the look-out. He's like a . . . a . . . I don't know what he's like, but we're running out of time."

"Like an owl?" Milkers offered.

"I guess, except owls aren't alert during the day and. . . no, an owl really doesn't work at all. Keep thinking. Actually, just forget about it. It isn't healthy to think that hard at this time of the night. We'd probably strain our brains."

"You can't strain your brain. It isn't a muscle."

"Will you just put some shoes on, Milkshake?"

"Hey, if you were a milkshake, what flavor do you think you'd be?" Milkers asked, dead serious.

It was hard to get mad at him when he tried to have a heart to heart with you.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Mint chocolate chip, I guess. How about you?"

“Strawberry,” Milkers said without an explanation.

After Milkers laced up his shoes and grabbed his sombrero, we began our trek over to Nutty’s house. It was windy and pretty chilly out, so we walked faster than we normally would’ve. We were too dumb to come up with a plan on our way over, so when we got to his house and ducked below his window, we just sat there.

“What’s the plan?” Milkers asked.

“I don’t know. I thought you were coming up with one on the way over. I’ve never heard you keep your mouth shut for that long.”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking. What should we do?”

“Let’s tell him we’re going to egg Coach Watkins’s house.”

“Nah,” Milkers said. “He wouldn’t buy that. He knows we’re too scared of that walking steroid.”

“Let’s just wing it,” I said while I knocked on the window. “I’m too tired to sit out here the whole night.”

Nutty had the window open before I finished my sentence.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Uh, my dad said the trout are running,” Milkers said. “I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d see if you guys wanted to head down to the creek.”

“Yeah, I suppose I’m up for a little fishing. Let me throw on some clothes. Do you guys have your rods with you?”

“Yeah,” Milkers said.

“You know it,” I tossed in.

“Okay, meet me in the backyard. I’ll be out in a minute,” Nutty said.

Milkers and I scooted to the back, hiding our enormous sombreros the best we could. There was nowhere to hide, so Milkers stood to the right of the door and I stood to the left.

We heard Nutty’s footsteps. Milkers and I each raised a hand, ready to swat. The second I saw a part of Nutty appear in the doorway, I wound up and swung at what I thought was the right height. Milkers had the reflexes of a ten-year-old on Mountain Dew, though, so my hand ended up hitting his arm.

“Blocked!” Nutty semi-yelled, trying not to wake his parents. “You’re done dancing, Milkers. I knew all along what you two goons were up to.”

Nutty went on, raising his arms in victory. I saw my window of opportunity.

“Still feel like heading down to the . . . ouch!”

It was an ouch of surprise more than anything. I made sure it was nothing more than a tap. I felt bad enough for taking such an easy shot. It’s all the same in the record books, though.

“Sorry, Nutty,” I explained, “but when it comes to winning, I’m mean as a snake.”

“I’d say a grass snake at best,” Milkers added.

“More like a rattlesnake,” I said. “Let’s see here. From now on, a slap ball is only legit if the attacker is wearing a sombrero and touching Reginald Swarbrick at the time of the slap.”

“How is that even possible?” Nutty asked. “I object. Unreasonable rule.”

“Mr. Milkers, may we have the opinion of a neutral party who’s no longer a part of this event?” I asked.

“You certainly may, Gil. In my humble, yet expert opinion, this rule is within the limits of doability.”

“First of all, if I do touch that kid, I’m going to smell like a mixture of moldy cheese and cat piss for a week,” Nutty complained.

“If you’re scared to touch him, you can just throw in the towel right now,” I said. “I’ll take a gift-wrapped win any day of the week.”

“In your dreams,” Nutty said. “Now if you don’t mind, I think I’ll try to catch a few Zs tonight.”

“Alright, we’ll catch you later,” Milkers said.

“G’night, Nutty,” I said. “And good luck. I think you’ll need it.”

From the minute I woke up, I was on edge. I experienced life as a paranoid schizophrenic for one day. I thought every person that came within a fifty yard radius was somehow a part of Nutty’s elaborate scheme to nail me with a slap ball. If someone tapped me on the shoulder, I probably would have let out a yelp louder than a baby getting its first shot.

I was so high strung all day long that I just needed to crash. My walk home from Sal’s seemed longer than normal, and once my house was in sight, my eyelids felt like fifty-pound dumbbells. When I opened the door and saw Reginald Swarbrick and Nutty sipping on cokes and chatting it up with my folks, my first reaction was to cover up, but I quickly moved my hands away so my parents wouldn’t catch on to anything.

“Oh, hey, Gil,” Nutty said. “I was just telling your folks that I was cleaning my room today and came across this sombrero. I just figured something as nice as this shouldn’t only be worn once, you know?”

“Yeah, I, uh, guess you have a point there,” I said. “It is a mighty fine sombrero.”

“And by the way, I bumped into Reg here today. We’re going to shoot some buckets tonight. We just wanted to swing by and see if you’re interested.”

“Uh, I don’t, ah, not tonight, guys. I’m pretty tired out from work and all. Maybe next time.”

“Well, why don’t you boys stay for dinner at least?” Mom asked. “I have a big meatloaf in the oven right now. There’s plenty for everyone.”

“So you guys are going to play a little round ball, huh?” Dad asked. “You know, I used to be a pretty good player in my hey-day.”

Reg is great at turning a conversation into one big, awkward moment.

“What’s round ball?” he wondered out loud.

Nutty’s sombrero sat right at Reg’s eye level. It apparently invaded his privacy because he kept flinching and blinking a lot like he thought it was about to poke his eye out.

“Oh, you know, basketball. I guess my lingo is a little outdated,” Dad said, letting Reg off the hook.

Normally Nutty would be able to save the day and talk our ears off, but I could tell he had other things on his mind. There was a short quiet spell interrupted by Reginald’s attempt to bring Mom into the convo.

“So, Mrs. Sanders, what’s your favorite color?” he asked.

“Good question, Reginald. Let’s see, here. I guess I would have to say purple. I’ve always enjoyed purple,” she said. “How about you?”

“Well,” Reginald began, “it depends what day you catch me on. Today I’d go with mauve, definitely.”

Was he hitting on my mom? Yuck.

“Sometimes it’s brown, though. And my favorite crayon color used to be orange-yellow, so I guess that counts, too. My parents used to buy me new packs of crayons because I’d always wear the orange-yellow one down to a stub right away. All the others were in tip-top shape, including the yellow-orange, but I’d always need a new box for my favorite color. It reminds me of the sun.”

I had to end the train wreck.

“So, who all did you guys rope into playing ball tonight?” I asked.

“We got Jimbo, and Mikey, and Milkerc is going to join us, too. That’s why we were hoping to talk you into playing. You know, even teams.”

Just then I felt a slap on my thigh. A clumsy attempt at best, but then again, it was a blind shot.

“Oops, sorry Reg,” Nutty said. “I didn’t mean to bump you. Sometimes I think my elbow has a mind of its own. I’ve been thinking about getting a leash for it.”

“What do you mean? I don’t get it,” Reg said.

“Never mind,” Nutty said. “It’s no big deal.”

I covered up with one hand. It made eating corn on the cob pretty difficult.

“How come you’re eating your corn like that?” Nutty asked.

“I think it tastes better when you eat it with one hand,” I said. “That way more of the butter and salt stays on the corn rather than getting all over my hand. You should try it some time.”

“Mrs. Sanders, what in the world did you put in this meatloaf to keep it so moist?” Reg asked, and for once I was thankful that he opened up his yapper.

“Oh, now Reginald, if I told you that, I’d be forced to kill you,” Mom said. Reg looked terrified. “It’s an old family recipe handed down from my great grandmother.”

The rest of dinner continued on with Nutty plotting his next strike and Reg filling the air with his babble. I got up to help clear the dishes from the table and also to move as far away as possible from my arch enemy, RegiNutt. Alone, neither could harm me, but together they could set off the most lethal slap ball known to mankind. I had to defuse the situation before it destroyed me. I just didn’t know how.

I sure could have used MacGyver. He probably could have gotten rid of RegiNutt with a paperclip, half a bottle of vinegar, some rope, and a chunk of Mom’s loaf. Well, I’m no MacGyver, but we do have the same philosophy. Work with what you’ve got. In this case, I had a sink full of dishes and a mom who never had a break from doing them. I turned the water on and dumped some dish soap in. It was perfect. Nutty couldn’t make an attempt because I faced the sink, and there was about an inch between my crotch and the counter.

“Gil, I can do those. Why don’t you go play basketball with your friends?”

“Ma, I had a long day. I’ll catch the next game, guys. Reg, teach this guy a couple of moves, would you?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Thanks for an outstanding meal, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders.” Then I heard him ask Nutty, softly, “What are these moves he’s talking about?”

“Never mind,” Nutty said, irritated.

He went to all the trouble of wearing that stupid sombrero and talking Reginald Swarbrick into coming with him, and all he got off was one weak attempt. Although he technically had plenty of time left, we both knew then that he missed out on his opportunity.

“Thanks for dinner,” Nutty said to my parents. “See you, Gil. Let me know when you’re man enough to face me on the court.”

“One win in a night is plenty for me,” I said. “You guys have fun.”

Sure enough, the only time I ever saw that sombrero, Nutty, and Reg all together again was in a wicked nightmare that woke me up in a cold sweat that same night.

Sometimes you have to break a sweat to put a win in the record books.

JANUARY 2000

I was pissed when I woke up and realized that the world hadn't blown up.

I figured getting revenge for Nutty was the answer to everything, but it turned out that it didn't change much at all. Rose called me up to ask why Milkens and I punched out her husband.

"We wanted him to see what it feels like," I said.

"That's what I figured," she said.

She asked me to come over that night, and to bring Milkens along, too, so she could talk to us while Mr. McNutt was out of the house. I didn't want to chat about it, really, but I figured I couldn't just pretend like it never happened, so I rounded Milkens up and we walked over to their place.

When we made it there, Rose offered us some food and drinks like usual, but we didn't want any. Our stomachs weren't feeling quite right. She asked how we were doing, how the football season went for Milkens, if we had girlfriends, if we were keeping our grades up, and all that kind of stuff.

It was the same as always. Whenever we went over there, Rose was interested in us. Not in a bad, nosey parent type of way. Curious in a good way. And so we told her just about anything and everything, like she was one of us.

After all the friendly chatting, Rose looked at us real hard, and then she let it all out.

"Boys, I've made a lot of mistakes in my life."

Her eyes were shiny and her voice trembled. She told us about that same car accident Nutty once described.

“My child died that day. My dreams died that day. In some ways, I lost my mind that day. I have never been the same person I was before that accident.”

I remembered the time that Milkers and I walked into the McNutt’s house because nobody could hear the doorbell over the giant speakers that pumped out “Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey.” It wasn’t surprising since Rose was about the biggest Beatles fan of all time but always quick to point out that Paul McCartney was far and away the best of the four. When we opened the door, we spotted Nutty and his mom dancing. Not just dancing, though. They were taking turns pulling off the most ridiculous moves I’ve ever seen. As the song morphed from a lazy lull to a surge of energy, their bodies followed along. When they spotted us, Rose invited us to join in on their game, so we did. We kicked off our shoes, and the music shook the floor just enough to tickle my feet. The goal was to make the others crack a smile using dance moves. Our lips twisted and turned, fighting to hold back the laughter.

Then I wondered what she was like before the accident, but my thoughts didn’t have the time to travel on any further than that.

“I started drinking,” she told us. “A lot.”

It hurt her to say it. It looked like someone pinched her in the arm the whole time she talked because her face was all scrunched up and she held onto one arm with her hand.

“What I’m trying to say is that this cancer is a lie.”

She blurted it out real quick like she was ripping a band-aid off. A giant silence settled into the room. It was the kind that makes you think you heard wrong or that you imagined everything that just took place.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Between sobs, Rose told us that she never did have cancer. She didn’t lose her hair because of chemotherapy treatments. She’s been shaving her head every single morning for years. She’d have family and friends drive her to the hospital and drop her off there. She’d just sit in the lobby for a couple of hours and read magazines. She’d tell whoever picked her up how bad the news was.

The tears fell even faster. She took a minute to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. She lit up a cigarette and looked at the ground as she told us the rest.

She had complained to everyone in town that she didn’t know how she could pay for the treatments. Rose found ways to work it into every conversation, even if it was just a cashier asking how she was doing out of obligation. Somewhere along the way, a fundraiser was started up. People sent get well cards, letters, and some even sent money, but the whole thing was a scam.

“Don’t ask me why I did it because I really don’t know,” she said.

She told us that Mr. McNutt didn’t know any of this until recently. The night she told him, he couldn’t handle the news and said he had to get out of the house, so Mr. McNutt headed off to The Thirsty Camel where he bumped into us.

After that whole confession, Rose took a break and studied us. She opened her mouth like she was about to talk again, but then she changed her mind, sucked on her cigarette, and exhaled deeply, blowing smoke into the sky.

When we realized that Rose had finished spilling her guts, Milkers piped up and said we'd better head on out.

“You sure you boys don't want something to eat? I've got some fresh baked cookies here. Might even be warm yet.”

We declined the offer.

Up until that point, I'd always thought of Rose as the coolest mom of all time, but as we left, a strange concoction of emotions joined together. I felt like I didn't even know her anymore.

When I returned to school after the holiday break, I added everything that had happened to my comic book. Intergalactic Gil and Astronomic Auggie defeat the evil Dr. McNutt in a battle, but nobody escapes the grip of the black holes. The universe is still in danger. I was trying to think of how Intergalactic Gil could possibly escape the black hole for good when the bell rang and I had to head off to Sociology.

Mr. Donnelly started class in his usual way by turning on some Led Zeppelin, kicking off his shoes, leaning back in his chair, and using his desk as a footrest. While playing the air guitar, he told us how great the music used to be and how horrible it is today.

Then Mr. Donnelly said it's a real gas learning about other cultures. I had no idea what he meant by that, but I figured it must be a good thing because that's when he

introduced the new foreign exchange student, Margarita, and said how lucky we were to have her join our class.

I was staring long before Mr. Donnelly mentioned her name. Her skin was the color of caramel. Not the hard, chewy caramel, but the soft, milky kind. She had the longest eyelashes I've ever seen. I've never really noticed a girl's eyebrows until then, either, but hers gradually rose up until they peaked like a mountain-top and then trailed off thinner and thinner until they reached a perfect, sharp point. They accentuated her hazel, almond-shaped eyes. Her hair was long and black, and she wore it down instead of pulling it back like most of the other girls with long hair. Her jeans and long sleeved shirt were just tight enough to show the way her small curves fit her body like the rolling waves fit Lake Superior on a warm, breezy day.

Her looks weren't even the best part about her, though. Not even close. She had the sexiest voice combined with an even more amazing accent. Mr. Donnelly introduced her as Mar-gar-ree-tuh, which was the only way I've ever heard the word pronounced.

When Margarita introduced herself, though, her name rolled off her tongue in a way that really did make it sound like a pearl, which is what her name means. I looked it up. She had this real soft voice, but not quiet like shy people who mumble because they're afraid to talk around a group. Somehow hers was still confident and strong. Once in a while, she had to think about a word or a phrase, or ask if she was saying something correctly, but I thought she spoke English better than anyone I've ever known. Everyone else's way of talking sounded so clunky in comparison.

Margarita said that she's from Chihuahua, Mexico and she was staying with a host family in Washburn through the rest of the school year.

The first chance I had, I asked Milkens what he thought.

"Have you seen her yet?" I asked.

"Who?" Milkens asked.

"The foreign exchange student. Margarita."

"Oh, yeah. I've seen her."

"So, what do you think?"

"I'd say a northern at best," he said. "Possibly a nice bass."

"No way, Milkens," I said. "Our code doesn't work for this girl."

"Why not? Our code has worked for every other girl," he said.

I didn't quite know how to explain it. I'd had crushes before. I had one on Kristy for most of my life. This was different, though.

"Margarita's no fish," is all I came up with.

Besides Margarita, there was one other good thing about the world remaining intact. *Time* magazine named Einstein the person of the century.

I went digging in the library to learn more about him, and I came across a picture of him riding a bike. His long, white hair stuck up in all directions, waving in the wind, and he wore a grin on his face. I closed my eyes a little bit and squinted at the picture, and I realized that he looked more like a kid than an old man.

I'm not sure if there's a heaven or anything like it, but if there is, I'll bet Nutty and old Al are getting along just great. The *Heavenly Daily Press* probably did a story on

the two of them already. “Long Lost Geniuses Finally Reunited,” the headlines read, and I’ll bet they included a picture of both of them tooling around on their bikes, bunny hopping from cloud to cloud.

FEBRUARY 2000

Things were going along swimmingly at school. I hadn't been called a woman-beater or any version of it for at least a month. Finally, I had become your run-of-the-mill freshman no-name, and I liked it.

Algebra, with Mrs. Ziggerton, was even more boring than usual. She moved around so slowly that I thought about jumping out the window and finding her a nice big stick to use as a cane. She has the worst case of old-lady-saggy-skin-under-the-arms I've ever seen, and when she wrote on the chalkboard it went crazy, bobbing and weaving all over the place. A couple of times, I thought it might swing up and slap her in the face. Mrs. Ziggerton says "umm" and "okay" so much that five minutes into class I started a running tally. Forty-seven umms and sixty-two okays. Not bad for forty-five minutes.

I had Sociology to look forward to, though, and since Valentine's Day was approaching quickly, Mr. Donnelly asked Margarita to explain how it's celebrated in Mexico.

She said the holiday is called El Día de San Valentín or El Día del Amor y la Amistad. Either Valentine's Day or The Day of Love and Friendship. She said it's celebrated in basically the same way with cards, flowers, candy, and all that kind of stuff.

Hearing Margarita say the word amor made her even more irresistible.

Einstein's theory of relativity predicted that all objects warp the space around them, although this warping is only measurable around massive objects like a star or the sun. Margarita isn't a massive object, but she sure warped me into a whole other person

when I was near her. During that class, my armpits were soaked and my voice was ready and waiting to jump up about five octaves.

When I saw Sal, I tried to get some advice.

“Sal, can I ask you a question about women?” I asked.

He looked at me for a minute, and his eyes got all big like the question had surprised him.

“Shoot,” he said.

I told him all about Margarita and how amazing she is.

“It’s not fair, though,” I said. “She’s warping my entire body, and I don’t even know if she’s aware that I exist. I think I’m invisible to her.”

“I’m not sure if you want to take advice about women from an old codger like me, but I say you need to find a way to make yourself visible.”

“How do I do that?” I asked.

“Any way you can.”

So I listened to Sal, and I made Margarita a Valentine. I did some detective work to find her locker and slipped it in there. Later, I thought more than once about trying to break into the locker to get it out of there, but I knew I’d just have to wait and see.

I had other things to worry about anyways. Sal had slipped on a patch of ice while walking up his driveway. He fractured his hip and ended up with a big bruise above his eye. Who knows how long he laid there in the bitter cold before one of his neighbors noticed him. By that time he’d given up yelling for help.

He was taken to the hospital and told that he needed surgery to repair his hip. The doctor said that following the surgery, living in a nursing home would probably be the best idea because of Sal's age and all the extra help he'd need.

I called Myra and made sure she knew what happened. She said she'd come up as soon as possible to spend a couple days with Sal, but she agreed with the doctor. Myra lived too far away to be much help, and it was the same case with the rest of Sal's relatives.

I'll bet there was a pretty good battle that went on between Sal, his doctor, and Myra, but apparently they talked Sal into living at the nursing home until he could recover enough to live on his own again. The agreement was fair in everyone's mind because Sal probably thought he'd be back in his home within a month or two, and doc and Myra figured the recovery would take long enough that Sal would eventually realize he could no longer take care of himself.

Following the surgery, I went to Riverside Nursing Home to pay Sal a visit on his first day there. Luckily, like most things in Washburn, it's within walking distance.

I found him in his new room sitting in a wheelchair.

"How do you like the new wheels?" he asked. "What do you say we take a spin?"

As I pushed Sal down the long hallway, he grinned and introduced himself to the first resident we passed.

"Say, who's this little chicken?" Sal asked.

The woman raised her hand to her ear.

“I said, what’s your name, darling?”

“Edith. Edith Peeler.”

Sal took hold of the wheels and rolled toward Edith, freeing himself of my help. He grabbed Edith’s hand and gave it a kiss.

“Well, I sure do hope all the ladies in Riverside are as lovely as you are,” Sal said. “Onwards, Gil,” he said, pointing ahead in the direction of two more women.

The first sat in a wheelchair, and her head tilted to the side. A stream of saliva flowed from her mouth, and a small, shiny pool sat on the floor beneath her.

“Afternoon,” Sal said, and I knew he was ready to head on. Sal gave his wheels a spin again, so I let him go and followed behind. He moved quickly to catch the woman with the walker. He pushed on his wheels as hard as he could and picked up some momentum. Then he pulled up alongside the lady and slowed down to match her speed.

She was tall and slim, with strong forearms and tan skin. Her loosely curled gray hair had just a few white ones sprinkled in, and her turquoise blouse showed off her amazing eyes. She looked like she could’ve been a good twenty years younger than Sal.

“Hello there. My name’s Sal. I’m kind of new around here.”

By then I had caught up to him, but I pretended to look at a bulletin board while he made a new friend. His barrage of flirting caught me off guard. I’d never seen that side of Sal before, but I guess I’d never seen him around women, either.

“By the way, that’s a real spiffy shirt you have on,” he said. “It looks like the ocean when the sun hits it just right. A never-ending sea of shimmering diamonds. What’s your name, sugar?”

“Henrietta.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Henrietta,” Sal said. “This here is my good friend, Gil.”

“Excuse me, people,” a voice called. “I’m looking for a Sal Zahorski.” Her deep, booming voice carried down the hallway so everyone could hear, whether hearing aids were in or not. She trudged forward, and when she stopped at each doorway to peer in, her red curls continued to move. “Has anyone seen a Sal around here?”

Sal excused himself from Henrietta and turned his wheelchair around to face the racket. The red of Brenda’s hair, lipstick, and fingernails matched her scrubs.

“You Sal?” Brenda asked.

“I’ll be whoever you want me to be,” Sal said, chuckling.

“Listen,” she said. “If I wanted to play around, I’d still be a preschool teacher. I might still be changing diapers, but I’m through with the games. Are you Sal or ain’t you?”

“That’s me, ma’m. Sal Zahorski.”

“All right then,” she said. “My name’s Brenda, and I’m the aide that’ll be checking in on you most of the time. Follow me. I’m going to show you around.”

“Alrighty,” Sal said. “My friend Gil here is going to join us if you don’t mind.”

“Suit yourself,” she said.

Brenda stopped at a male community restroom, pounded on the door, and yelled for anyone in there to speak up. She rolled Sal into the large wheelchair accessible stall and pointed out the sturdy steel handle next to the toilet. Sal ignored this and scanned the

rest of the area. He noticed out loud that there were no reading materials or crossword puzzles lying around like he had at home.

We moved to the cafeteria where a small group of chatty women sat at one table. A man mumbled to himself and spilled peas on his lap at another.

“Geez-a-loo, this whole joint smells like stale oatmeal,” Sal said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Brenda said.

The recreation area was next. It was a dim, empty room with orange walls and a brown and green tiled floor. I wondered how any room could be so gloomy. The only two windows in the large room had steel bars that guarded the window panes. They cut the sunlight up into chunks and allowed only small squares of light to enter.

The tour ended back at Sal’s room where Brenda explained the daily routines and rules of living.

“Any questions, Mr. Zahorski?” Brenda asked.

“Just one,” Sal said. “What sort of punishment would I get for breaking the rules, and would it involve a spanking?”

“Mr. Zahorski, if you continue to harass me, I will make the rest of your stay here an uncomfortable one. And if you don’t believe me, I can give you my ex-husband’s name and number as a reference.”

“I don’t plan on being a bother to anyone here,” Sal said.

“Good. I’m here to help. That’s my line of work, and I do a damn good job of it. The sooner you learn that, the sooner you and I will get along.”

This lady wasn’t joking. She was just plain mean.

“She’s as grumpy as Rip Van Winkle waking up from a twenty year nap, ain’t she?” Sal asked after she walked away.

“Yeah, I thought she was going to smack you there for a minute,” I joked. “That would be something, eh? Getting beat up by a woman?”

I told Sal I had to take off and that I’d explain later. I practically ran through the halls of the nursing home. Once I got outside I did run, full speed, until I reached the McNutt’s. I pounded on the door over and over until it opened. Rose looked at me and smiled.

“Hello, Gil. Come on in.”

“What didn’t you tell us the last time we talked to you?”

I didn’t just ask her. I accused her.

“Why don’t you come in? We can talk inside.”

“I don’t want to come inside,” I told her. “You hit Nutty. It wasn’t your husband. You’re the one who hit him, aren’t you?”

I made her cry. Just like that. Under thirty seconds.

“I tried to tell you boys. I intended to tell you boys the truth. Only part of it came out.”

“Then tell me now. Tell me the truth.”

Even though I’d figured it out, I still wanted to be wrong.

“After that car accident, after losing my voice, after losing my own son, sometimes I’d get drunk and I would let out all of my sadness, and anger, and

disappointment. And sometimes I ended up hitting Benny. I'm the one who hit him. Not Mr. McNutt."

This woman I once thought of as perfect had plenty of flaws. Big ones.

"As fate would have it, the lock on our bathroom door decided to stop working properly one morning. As I shaved my head, same as I did every other day for years, Benny walked in, not realizing I was in there. He pieced it all together soon enough."

She sunk down until she sat on her front porch.

"It crushed him," she said, "and if that wasn't bad enough, I started beating him worse than ever. I threatened him not to tell anyone. Those last weeks I was so cruel, and the remarkable thing was that he never once raised a finger to fight back. Didn't have the heart to hurt his mama."

In a few short minutes, Rose had morphed into the real villain, and I dumped all the hate I'd once felt for her husband onto her.

"You killed my best friend," I said, fuming.

It was dark out, but I took the long way home anyways. I walked on the side of the highway as cars raced by me like blurry balls of light passing into the night.

"What's the hurry?" I shouted out after one of them.

Nobody answered, though. So I walked on.

SHOPPING AND MOPPING

SUMMER 1999

I went grocery shopping with my mom. I don't go along often, but you can only go without cookies and chips for so long, so I decided I'd better give her some help.

Every time I turned a corner, the same kid whizzed by. He had one foot on the bottom of the shopping cart and used the other one to pedal. On the straight stretches he'd really get going. Then he'd put both feet on the cart and sort of hunch over, like he was worried about air resistance slowing down his warp speed. The kid's mom seemed to be perfectly content with the fact that her spazoid kid was crashing into other people rather than her. The little bugger even ran over my foot. I thought about grabbing a summer sausage and chucking it at the back of his head, but I realized that I was just jealous. I wanted to be the one cruising around on a grocery cart.

That's when I started thinking up the next event. I paid closer attention to the lay of the land, and by the time Mom had finished shopping, I'd planned it all out with Ryley Brumble, who is quite possibly the finest employee Bob's Grocery has ever seen.

Milkers, Nutty, and I made it to the store at quarter to ten on Saturday night. I hadn't told the guys what we were doing yet, and it drove Milkers crazy. Just like Ryley predicted, the store was empty. He was the one left in charge of closing the place down, and there weren't any last minute shoppers in sight.

"Attention all Bob's Grocery shoppers," Ryley yelled. "There will be a race starting shortly. Please move away from the center of the aisles, or you will be run over."

Ryley graduated a few years back but never made it out of Washburn. He was a standout baseball player in our conference, but he was a horrible student. He got a couple of scholarship offers from no-name colleges but said he'd rather die in Washburn than do any more homework. The only ball he plays now is in the leagues where the teams keep a better tally of empty beer cans than the actual score of the games.

"Alright, here we go," Ryley said as he grabbed shopping carts for the three of us. "I'll be reffing this here race, so listen up. I almost forgot. Hang on a minute."

He came back with three mops. All of them looked like they had seen better days.

"Here are your oars," Ryley said. "What you're going to do is hop into your carts and use these to paddle your way around the store. First guy to polish off a stick of butter in aisle one, a jar of pickled eggs in aisle three, a bottle of Tabasco sauce in aisle five, and then ring the bell in one of the checkout aisles will be the winner. If you fall or get out of your cart, you have to bring it back to the starting point, get back in, and go from there. You don't have to start over with the food, though. You can't touch the other guys or their carts with any part of your body, but bumper carts are allowed and you can hit a cart with your mop if you want. By the way, I'm picking up the tab for the winner. Losers have to pay for their food. Is that about it, Gil?"

"You got it," I said.

I told Ryley I would let him choose what the three foods would be, so hearing his choices was a surprise to me, too. I was impressed. Gross, but doable.

"Gentlemen, start your engines," Ryley said. I think he was even more into the race than the rest of us.

Nutty climbed into the cart and decided to stand in it surfer style. I fiddled around until I realized it felt most comfortable to kneel. Ryley held Milkerc's cart steady while he tumbled in. He almost tipped the cart even with Ryley's help. Milkerc definitely didn't want to stand, and he couldn't fit in the cart if he kneeled, so he sat in the cart and dangled his legs over the front.

"Here we go," Ryley said. "On my count. One...two...three...go!"

I thought about trying to tip Milkerc right at the start, but Nutty was the one actually moving, so I stuck my mop in front of one of his rear wheels. He had just enough momentum built up that he tipped forward and hit the deck.

Ryley laughed so hard that he wheezed. "Nice, nice," was about all he could get out.

While Nutty tried to get situated again and Milkerc tried to figure out how to move, I crept forward and kept an eye out for the butter. I rolled to a slow stop and reached for the first one I spotted, and just as I grabbed a box, Milkerc rammed me out of the way. I dropped the one I had in my hand and circled back. By the time I made it near the butter again, Milkerc had gnawed his stick down to a stump. Nutty made a quick recovery from his dive, and he took his first bite as I wheeled up and snagged a stick of butter. I peeled the wrapper back and pretended I was eating a Butterfinger. I did just fine with my first bite, but then I peeked over at Nutty. He was mid-gag and looked like a cat hacking up a hairball.

He was determined, though, and put that bite right down the hatch. I took little rabbit bites and worked my way through one stick of pure heart attack. I kept my eyes shut so I wouldn't have to watch Nutty hack anything up.

“Hey, Ref, check it out,” Milkers said. “Mine's gone.”

“Carry on, Mr. Milkers,” Ryley said.

The whole candy bar thing wasn't working out too well for me, so I started thinking of things that go well with butter. I took another bite and pictured a stack of pancakes while I chewed and swallowed. On the next bite I thought of bagels, and on the next it was noodles. It seemed to do the trick, and before I knew it, I was done. I looked at Ryley for approval, grabbed my mop, and started on my merry way. I turned for one last look at Nutty, who was still struggling to choke his down.

I headed toward the end of the aisle and pushed off a giant ham hock to help make the turn. I was surprised to see that Milkers hadn't even made it into the third aisle. He was just tooling along, doing his best to move forward at all. He couldn't get much leverage using his mop the way he was sunk down so far. I passed Milkers, and I made sure to give his cart a whack with my mop while I did it. I had no idea where the pickled eggs were, so I took my time moving through the aisle. I saw jars galore and knew I hit the jackpot. Pickled mushrooms, pickled radishes, pickled this, pickled that, and there they were, the pickled eggs. The jars were bigger than my head. Eating a pickled egg is just one of those things you never want to have to do. It's up there with sitting on a porcupine and letting Aunt Bertha kiss you on the lips.

I grabbed a jar and spent the next five minutes trying to budge the lid. Halfway into my struggle, Milkers grabbed a jar, popped the lid off with one twist, and took the time to sit and laugh at me before he started in on the eggs. Just when I thought my arms were about to fall off, I came up with an idea.

“Clean up on aisle three,” I yelled.

I threw the jar of eggs on the ground, and it split open with a crash. My idea was enough to get the jar open, but I hadn't thought about how I'd actually get a hold of the eggs when they were spread out across the aisle. Milkers threw eggs into his mouth like they were popcorn and stared at me like I was a movie. I saw Nutty round the corner as I thought of my next move. The look on his face had me worried. He eyed up the mess, crept forward, and steered toward the eggs in the center off the aisle. He scooted past one, then another, and missed the last sitting duck by a nose hair.

“Yes,” I yelled. “Nice try, Nutty. Better luck next time, bud.”

He didn't say a thing. He waited for his cart to roll to a stop, turned around, and steered the cart back for seconds. This time, he moved at an egg like a slug on vacation until his front wheel touched it. He pushed off on his mop, but the egg just slid off to the side. Rather than try to turn around right there, Nutty went back to the start of the aisle, pulled a nice little 180, and came back at us. I mopped as many eggs to the side of the aisle as I could while Nutty picked up speed. There was one more out of mop's reach, but Nutty wasn't about to hit the brakes, so I scooted to the edge of the aisle. Nutty locked in on the target and paddled hard to pick up speed. At the last second, he steered to his right and squashed the egg. He was moving too fast to correct his last minute turn, and he

crashed into the aisle, flying out of his cart and knocking over a pile of ketchup and mustard bottles.

“Yes sir,” Nutty screamed. “Good luck eating that one.”

“Back to the start,” Ryley said to Nutty.

“I don’t have to eat that one, right Ryley?” I asked.

“It came from your jar, didn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, then, it’s all yours. Enjoy.”

I never pictured Ryley as a stickler for the rules, but I knew it wouldn’t do me any good to argue. First, I needed to figure out how to get a hold of the eggs. I could save the worrying about the egg goulash sitting in the middle of the aisle until I had polished off all the decent ones. I dangled over the edge of my cart to see if I’d be able to reach the eggs. Not even close.

“Ryley, is it legal to grab a utensil from another aisle?” I asked.

“If you pay for it when this is over.”

Before he finished his sentence, I was on my way. I rolled by the aisles one by one and read the big signs above them. Aisle eight had paper towels and paper plates aside from a bunch of other stuff I didn’t care about right then. It sounded like a winner, so I turned in, grabbed a skewer and a spatula, and mopped my way back to aisle three.

A lot happened while I was gone. Milkers had polished off every last egg, but he was stuck in the mud. Nutty put his mop under Milkers’s cart and held it in place.

Milkers couldn't do a thing about it. He had a hard enough time moving his cart without a roadblock. Nutty reached down into his cart and grabbed another egg to gnaw on.

“There's got to be a rule against this kind of thing,” Milkers begged.

“Sorry Milky,” Ryley said. “It's a good move.”

I wheeled up next to an egg and speared it. I took a deep breath and bit into it. I expected worse. It was like chewing on a tasteless hunk of rubber. I moved to the next egg in sight, snagged it, and horsed it down. The secret to my success was that I didn't stop to think about all the dirty shoes that tramped down that same aisle earlier in the day. I steered my way around the aisle and cleaned up my eggs one by one when I noticed that Nutty let go of his hold on Milkers and started on his way. By the time Milkers got his cart moving, Nutty had made it to the end of the aisle. The last whole egg sat in my mouth when Milkers also rounded the corner and headed out of sight.

I had gone too far to give up now. Plus, I figured Milkers and Nutty could be tipping each other over for all I knew, so I sucked it up and turned to my trusty spatula. I scraped up what was left of the scrambled egg, took a look at it, and threw it down the hatch. I even licked the spatula clean to make sure that Ryley wouldn't penalize me.

I paddled on to aisle five, and when I turned the corner, I saw the guys parked one in front of the other at the far end. I paddled like no one has ever paddled in the history of shopping cart races. I had it in turbo gear when I braced myself for the crash. Milkers faced the other way and never saw it coming. Nutty turned at the last minute and had just enough time to kneel down so he wouldn't tip as easily. Nutty took the brunt of it, but his

cart rammed into Milkers's, and it was enough to make Milkers drop his Tabasco onto the floor.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Milkers asked. “I can't reach that.”

“Either figure out how to get that one or start in on a new bottle, man,” Ryley suggested.

“I don't think I should be drinking any more of that stuff,” he said. “My stomach doesn't feel so good.”

While Milkers debated whether or not to continue, Nutty and I had our heads tilted back. The thing about Tabasco sauce is that there's no quick way to down a bottle of it. You have to shake it, and tap it, and yell at it, and all along the way, it's busy burning you from your mouth all the way down to your gut.

I felt a bit of wetness on my chin, but before I even had a chance to move my tongue, Ref Ryley was on my case.

“You better clean that up, Gil. I'm not going to pretend I don't see you missing your mouth.”

Milkers made a weak attempt to pull himself up so he could get his bottle off the ground. Thirty seconds later, he was lifeless again.

“I'm done,” Milkers said.

Nutty took the time to throw in an insult.

“Quitter.”

I knew that I couldn't waste a second, so I stayed focused on the sauce at hand. By now, the pain had stopped. My taste buds were long gone. “Come on,” I yelled at my

bottle, knowing that Nutty had a lead. I found that tapping the bottom of the bottle while shaking it made it come out just a hair faster, so I kept this going until Nutty had finished.

“Done,” he said. “Check it out, Ryley.”

Ryley grabbed the bottle and turned it upside down. He waited a good ten seconds.

“Alright, it’s good,” he finally said.

Since I was closer to the checkout counters by a cart’s length or two, I decided to use the head start to my advantage. I hung onto my Tabasco while I paddled on my way. I got up some speed and then coasted in order to swig another few drops. Then I angled my cart so I could move back and forth to guard all five of the checkout aisles.

“You can call me shadow if you want,” I said.

Then I took a swig to make my comment sound even cockier.

“No thanks,” Nutty said.

He pretended to push off in one direction, and then pushed himself backwards. It almost got me, but I recovered in time to block off the appropriate aisles.

“How can there possibly be Tabasco sauce still coming out of this little thing?” I asked.

I shook it even harder.

I just needed to hold Nutty off for a few more minutes. It was like basketball. I pictured our old gym teacher screaming, “Box him out! You got to get butts to nuts, back him out of there.”

Nutty held still. I could tell he was thinking because his eyes got squinty and his forehead wrinkled up a little bit. While I had the chance, I tilted my head back and went for the glory, thinking I had almost emptied the never-ending bottle of hot sauce. That's when he did it. He picked up his mop and used it as a go-go gadget arm. He reached past me and whacked the bell sitting on the counter of checkout aisle number two.

"Give us a call," I pleaded, hoping Ryley would say he had to bop the bell with his own hand. I kept drinking the sauce while I waited for the decision.

"We've got a winner," Ryley said.

Nutty hopped out of his shopping cart and rode it skateboard style, just like the little snot who gave me the idea for the event. He did a victory lap around the store, yee-ha-ing and whoo-hooing the whole way.

We stuck around for a while longer, making sure the mops were put away in back, the carts were put with the others, the floors were clean, and that everything we used was paid for. I can't believe I shelled out money to eat a stick of butter, pickled eggs, and Tabasco sauce. I figured the bright spot was that I could at least get in good with Mom by bringing home a new spatula and skewer. I wondered what I would say to her. Maybe something like, "Oh, hey Mom, these utensils looked like they're head and shoulders above the competition. I spotted a sale and just couldn't pass them up."

I decided to hide them in my room until I could think of something better.

They're still in my closet.

MARCH 2000

After I dropped the Valentine's Day card in Margarita's locker, the weeks dragged on and nothing happened, so I figured it was a lost cause. But one day, I happened to catch her looking at me. The first few times it happened, I quick looked away, and I'm pretty sure she did the same thing. Days of these kinds of looks passed by before I caught Margarita glancing at me in a different way. This time she had a little smile and she didn't turn away when I met her gaze, so I didn't either. I smiled right back.

When class let out, I caught up to Margarita in the hallway.

"Margarita," I said, but it sounded all wrong, like I had a mouthful of gravel.

She turned and looked at me.

"Hola," she said. "Hi, I mean."

My mouth ran out of saliva.

"Hi," I said.

I knew it was my job to say something more at that point, but I had nothing, so I just smiled while I thought. Margarita saved me.

"You are Gil, correct?" she asked. My name sounded like Geel when she said it. I loved it.

"Yeah. So how do you like Wisconsin so far?"

"Very good. Chilly, also. Still my body is not adjusted."

“Well, I’ve lived here my whole life and I’m not sure my body has adjusted to the winters yet, either. I’ll let you in on a local secret if you want.”

“Yes. Very much.”

“The best way to warm up on a cold day in Washburn is to get a hot chocolate at The Pudgy Seagull. If you ever want to try it, let me know, because I’ll be cold right up until the snow finally disappears.”

“We can try this today?”

I couldn’t believe it. I think my mouth opened and I gave her a blank, silent look for too long. She started to backtrack and say she could go alone if I was busy, but I cut her off before I missed out on my opportunity.

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s go after school.”

The rest of the day I couldn’t concentrate on a thing.

“Hello? Mr. Sanders, did you care to answer the question?” Mrs. Johanson asked in History.

She caught me daydreaming, but I figured I’d throw out a guess.

“Um. The Battle of the Bulge,” I said with confidence.

The class chuckled and Mrs. Johanson looked confused.

Later in the class, she did it again.

“I’ll go with Abe Lincoln,” I said.

“Mr. Sanders is in a fog today, class.”

She was right. I was caught in a dense fog of love.

At the Pudgy Seagull, Margarita and I sat across from each other in a booth. We talked about dogs, Washburn, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, shooting stars, burritos, Mr. Donelley, snowblowers, grilled corn on the cob, salsa dancing, Sal, seagulls, ice shanties, the pronunciation of her name, fireplaces, and ice cream.

Nutty must have come up enough times that Margarita asked about him. I didn't want to get all serious during our first real conversation, but when I told her that Nutty died, she was the one who continued the subject.

"Have you celebrated already?" she asked.

"You mean go to his funeral?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I mean celebrate. In Mexico, we have el Día de los Muertos."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Day of the Dead. A holiday to honor friends and family. Do you do this here?"

"No. I don't think so. How do you celebrate death?"

"Decorate a gravesite, eat and drink, play music, dance, tell stories."

It sounded strange, and different, and kind of nice.

Margarita told me how the holiday came from an ancient ritual of the Mexican natives.

"Death was a continuation of life," she said. "Not the end. To them, life was a dream. They woke up in death."

We talked so much that we ordered a second cup of hot chocolate. At first, I had a hard time looking Margarita in the eyes. After a while, though, I felt more and more comfortable, and I could look right back at her. Her eyes had this way of saying *I know*

what you're thinking and feeling and fearing and hoping. I know eyes can't talk, but I swear that's what hers said to me. It was like our eyes had their own conversation going on while our mouths continued a different one. They were some of the best conversations I've ever had.

The next time I visited Sal, I walked into his room with a paper bag in one hand and a radio in the other. I emptied the bag and handed over a to-go box filled with Sal's favorite, a gyro and fries, and took a seat at the foot of his bed.

Sal took a bite of a fry that was covered in Zorba's secret seasoning, and I could see him remembering the days when he'd meet his wife there once a week for dinner. They became such good friends with the owners that one of the menu choices is still called the Zahorski special.

"So, how are they treating you here?" I asked. "Like a king I'll bet, eh? One of these days I ought to join you here. We could be neighbors."

"That's a bunch of baloney," Sal said. "You don't want to live in one of these places. Do me a favor, would you?"

"Sure. What is it?" I asked.

"Never get old. Don't ever get old."

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a Hamm's that I'd grabbed from his house. I cracked it open and put it on the food tray that hovered over Sal and his bed.

"I can't let you eat a gyro without a beer to wash it down, right?" I asked.

Sal's eyes lit up.

"Bless your heart," he said. "A taste of God's nectar."

As he brought the beer to his mouth, Sal's hand shook so bad that it looked like he was getting ready to throw a Yahtzee. Beer trickled down his face and spilled onto his shirt.

"Damn arthritis," he muttered.

I dug through the paper bag in search of a napkin without any luck, so I grabbed some toilet paper and handed it to Sal. He wiped his face while he started in on a story.

"This Hamm's reminds me of the first job I got after coming home from the war," he said. "I tended bar at The Wooden Nickel. Whenever somebody would come in and order some fancy shmancy drink, I'd tell them to go across the street. We only served beer and shots. We called it a beer and a bump."

"How long did you tend bar there?" I asked.

"I didn't last more than a month or two," Sal said. "Elizabeth convinced me to get a job at the steel mill, and that's exactly what I did. That woman could have told me to slap a crocodile in the face, and I would've done it, you know what I mean?"

I nodded my head, wanting him to go on.

"It probably sounds silly, but every time I hit the hay, I say goodnight like she's still by my side. After forty-six years of marriage, the idea of sleeping alone isn't easy to handle. I'm a lucky man, though. I managed to talk an angel into spending her life with me."

"You must have a way with words."

"Words had nothing to do with it. After we'd been dating for some time, Elizabeth told me she'd never been fishing and wanted to give it a shot, so I took her out

in a rowboat. We spent a few hours tossing our lines in and didn't have any luck, so when a fish jumped off in the distance, it was the most action we saw all day. I'd been carrying the engagement ring around with me for days just waiting for the right moment to come along. I pointed to the spot where the fish had jumped, and when she turned her head, I pulled the ring out and slipped it on her finger before she knew what hit her. We just sat there and smiled, and then our smiles turned into laughs, and that's how I did it."

"How come you flirt with the women here if you still love your wife?" I asked.

I immediately regretted asking it, but Sal didn't get angry. He chose his words carefully in his head before he spoke.

"Well, I can think about and miss Elizabeth all I want, but sometimes it's when I appreciate another person's company that I'm able to remember her most clearly, if that makes any sense at all."

"I think it does," I said.

I told Sal he could pick the station, so I fiddled with the knob on the radio. I was about ready to give up when Sal said, "That's our winner. Turn it up. Turn it up some more."

"Simmer down over there!" Sal's neighbor yelled. "I'll call the cops if I have to."

"Stick it up your rear end, you old poop," Sal said loud enough for only me to hear. "Don't mind him. Gregor used to be a school bus driver. It just pops out whenever he hears noise."

We listened to the song. Sal shut his eyes, and his lips moved along with the words. Nothing came out of his mouth, but one lone tear started to crawl down his face before he wiped it away.

“You ever heard that song before?” he asked me when it ended.

“Nope. But that sounds like the saddest lady of all time.”

“It’s called ‘These Foolish Things,’ and that sad lady’s name is Billie Holiday. Her voice alone isn’t all that impressive, really. At least I don’t think so, but the emotion turns her voice into some sort of supernatural force. It must be magical if it can get an old geezer like me to tear up.”

Sal and I sat there and listened to that station for at least a half hour.

“I think I’m in love,” I blurted out finally.

“Is that right?” Sal asked. “We need to celebrate then. Love doesn’t just drop by and tap you on the shoulder every day, you know.”

“There’s a problem, though. She has to go back to Mexico after the school year. I’ve met the woman of my dreams, and she’s already packing her bags and getting ready to leave.”

“That is a bit of a pickle alright.”

“I don’t know what to do. I think about her when I wake up. She gives me a reason to get out of bed and go to school. Then I sit in class and think about her. When I get home, she’s still on my mind. Right up until I fall asleep. Sometimes I can’t even stop thinking about her while I sleep.”

“Well, there’s no use in hiding the truth about love from you. You’d discover it on your own anyway. Are you ready for it?”

“Yeah.”

“Love can be a bit of a sticky wicket.”

“That’s it? That’s the secret? I don’t even know what a sticky wicket is.”

“Yes siree Bob, love is a funny, funny beast.”

APRIL 2000

“Where am I?” Sal asked when I knocked on his door.

I thought he was joking with me at first, pretending to be a clueless old man. Sal sat up the best he could. He looked at the empty, off-white walls, and I realized he really was trying to remember how he ended up in such a small cubicle of plainness. He grabbed his glasses and tried to put them on, but he missed and poked himself in the forehead before sliding the curved ends past his ears.

“Where’s my family?” Sal asked.

“Your daughter lives in Florida,” I said. “She was here a while back to check in on you. Come on, it’s time to get up.”

“What about Elizabeth?”

It hurt to tell him the truth, but I couldn’t keep it from him.

“She passed away many years ago.”

“Oh. Well, unplug my body from this outlet, would you?”

“But you aren’t plugged into anything,” I said.

“Pull the plug anyways,” Sal said.

Then Brenda barged in.

“You better be either dead or dying,” she said.

She breezed past Sal’s bed, threw the curtains open, and same as always, acted like I wasn’t there.

“That’s the third morning in a row you’ve pressed that button. It’s there in case of emergencies only.”

“Where am I?” Sal asked again.

“You’re in heaven,” Brenda said. “And I’m your personal call girl.”

“Is Elizabeth coming today?”

“Let me go look at my crystal ball.”

Brenda helped Sal from the bed to his wheelchair. Her grip made Sal wince in pain, but all he let out was one heavy sigh.

“Hey, check out these new shoes,” Brenda said. “I found a good sale yesterday. Guess how much I paid for these puppies.”

“A nickel?”

Brenda let out a short, shrill burst of laughter.

“A nickel? You’ve been cooped up in this place too long.”

“Maybe we could go outside today,” Sal suggested.

“No time,” Brenda said. “We need to get you down to breakfast, pronto. They’re almost done serving.”

“I’m not hungry, though.”

“Too bad. You can build an oatmeal castle for all I care, but you need to head down to breakfast.”

I didn’t like the way Brenda talked to Sal, and I didn’t like the way she treated him, either. I hoped he’d get better so that things could go back to the way they were. He

could live at home, and I could check in on him, and we could talk to each other without Brenda ruining everything.

A week later, I dropped in on Sal again. Before I went up to the room, I asked Michelle how he'd been doing. She looked in on Sal less often than Brenda, but she's a whole lot nicer.

"He has his good days and his bad days, just like any of us," she said.

"But the last time I was here, he was a whole other person. He didn't know where he was, and his memory was completely shot."

She pulled up two chairs and sat me down to explain.

"Have you ever heard of dementia?" she asked.

"Sounds familiar," I said.

"Basically, it's a loss of mental functions, and symptoms can also include changes in personality or mood."

Michelle went on to explain that dementia could be caused by all sorts of things. In Sal's case, though, it was probably his head injury. She said it was also possible that he only appeared to have dementia. Sometimes severe depression can cause similar symptoms. Either way, Sal could be treated.

"So we're going to take good care of him and keep our eye on him," she said, "and we'll be doing everything we can to help him recover."

Even though I felt better after talking to Michelle, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw next. I took the elevator up to Sal's room and peeked in to make sure he was awake. His eyes were open, so I called out to say hello, but I had to do it three

times before Sal turned his head. His eyes were glazed and far off, and it took a while before they grew wider in recognition.

“What’s the good word?” I asked, just like he usually asked me.

Sal’s mouth puckered. Thick, white gunk clung to the corners of his mouth, rising and falling along with his quivering lips. “Help,” he said so softly that I could barely hear, and then once more, louder. His eyes darted from me to the doorway and back again as the rest of his body sat still. “Eclipse,” he said.

I knew for a fact that there wasn’t a solar or lunar eclipse that day, so I wondered what he was talking about. I dismissed it as gibberish.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “Are you uncomfortable?”

I propped Sal forward and rearranged the pillows, but no matter how I put them, Sal looked ready to slowly sag in any direction.

I nudged the door so it was mostly shut and then took my backpack off. I pulled out an old framed picture of Sal and his wife and set it on the nightstand. Then I took out a flask full of Early Times and two cocktail glasses I’d also grabbed from his house earlier in the day.

“I’m going to go get some ice for us. I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Gil, come here,” Sal said.

His words were drawn out in slow motion. He gripped my hand tightly.

“They’re holding me captive.”

“No, they’re just helping you heal up,” I said.

“What’s the deal here?” Sal whispered. “Are you pulling one over on me?”

“No, there’s no deal. You’re here to get better.”

“Say, Gil, what am I doing here?”

“You’re recovering from a fractured hip and a bonk on the head.”

“Who’s that out there?” Sal whispered.

“That’s one of the aides. She’s just helping your neighbor.”

“Take me with you. Eclipse.”

Our walkie talkie code finally popped into my mind. Sal wanted out of that room, so I did what I could. I helped him into his wheelchair, which wasn’t easy. He was like one giant, wet noodle. Although his hip healed up pretty well after the surgery, it wasn’t the same. Sal wanted to get back on his feet, but the doctor and the rest of the staff told him to use his wheelchair to get around. They didn’t want to risk another fall. Once in a while, they exercised Sal’s legs and helped him walk short distances, but for the most part, the only time he escaped the wheelchair was when he took a bath, used the toilet, or slept.

We went down to the main entrance and an attendant directed us to the cafeteria, where I filled a cup with ice. On the way back to the room, I snagged a flyer for an upcoming musical performance at the nursing home. When we returned to Sal’s room, I shut the door behind us and crammed a handful of ice into both cocktail glasses. I pulled the flask out and poured, coating the cubes with whisky. I handed over one of the drinks but realized that Sal couldn’t grip it on his own, so I took hold of the glass again and raised it to Sal’s mouth. He swallowed and smacked his lips together.

I took a sip of my own, and it still brought back memories of the time I barfed, but I figured Sal could use someone to share a drink with.

I looked past Sal and out his one lone window.

“Looks like the moon’s out tonight, just barely,” I said.

Sal turned toward the window and stared.

“Hand me my peepers, would you?” he asked.

I grabbed his glasses off the night stand, slid them onto his face, and waited as he scanned the sky.

“Looks like a toenail,” he said.

“There’s going to be a live band playing here in a few weeks. What do you say we each invite a lady to join us? A double date.”

Sal grunted, so I pretended it was a yes.

“Great,” I said. “I’ll ask Margarita to come, and you have the pick of the place here. This building is packed full of single ladies. I’ll leave the flyer here so you don’t forget.”

Every time I visited, I reminded Sal about the band. I told him I had already asked Margarita to come and that she was looking forward to meeting him, which was true.

Whenever I caught Sal on a good day, he seemed pretty much like his old self, but during most of my visits, his memory was fuzzy and he seemed confused. He kept asking me to get him out of there, so I knew I had to at least get him outside.

I had asked once before if I could take Sal out of the building, but I was told that I wasn’t authorized to do that. Only actual family members could. I asked again, though,

and this time I pushed the issue, and then I pushed some more, and finally I was told that I could do it but would need to have one of the nurse's aides come along.

Sure enough, it was Brenda that had to join us, and she wasn't happy about it, either. I think the sun makes her melt.

Sal wanted to go on the walking trail along the river, so we headed in that direction. I parked him once we came across three ducks.

"Can I feed them some bread?" Sal asked.

"What do I look like, a grocery store on legs?" Brenda asked.

Sal's eyes followed the ducks as they fought the current. They took turns sticking their chests out and slapping at the water while they hovered just above the surface. The ducks dipped their heads underwater and looked for food but gave up on the hunt and hopped onto the riverbank one by one. They approached Sal sideways, never quite looking right at him, but waddled back toward the river once they realized he had no food to offer.

Brenda took a final massive drag off her cigarette.

"Come on, boys," she said. "Time to head back."

She flicked her cigarette, and it sailed high. The breeze helped push it far away. As soon as it hit water, the ducks went after the cigarette. The first one there pecked at it quickly several times before he let it be.

"Get a load of that dumb duck," Brenda said. "Did you see that? He tried eating my cig."

Sal didn't respond, and neither did I.

We entered the nursing home again. As we passed the restroom near the main lobby, Sal asked to stop.

“Can’t this wait until we get up to your room?” Brenda asked.

“It’s an emergency,” Sal said.

“Everything’s an emergency to you people.”

“You don’t need to wait around,” I said. “I’ll help him.”

Brenda took off, and I knocked on the restroom door. Nobody was in there, so I wheeled Sal into the wheelchair accessible stall.

“Keep a lookout, buddy,” he whispered.

Sal wheeled himself into the stall but didn’t shut the door all the way and didn’t lift himself onto the toilet. I saw him stare at the huge walls. Sal reached into his shirt pocket, grabbed his black pen, and began to write. Two words in, his hand trembled. He stopped and stretched, spreading his fingers so his hand looked like a small starfish. I could tell the ache returned right away, but this time he didn’t stop. The pen moved in quick jerks, and when he finished, Sal tucked it back in his pocket. The large, sloppy block letters formed the words “BRENDA IS A HUSSY.”

Sal admired his graffiti. He looked at me, and we shared a laugh.

I brought Sal back to his room. While we watched a re-run episode of *Matlock*, Sal spotted someone out in the hallway and headed out there. I followed behind. Sal pushed on his wheels hard and gained on a woman at the end of the hall.

“Henrietta,” Sal called. He wasn’t loud enough to get her attention, so he continued on and called out again once he’d gained some ground. “Hey, Beautiful.”

That was the only part of their conversation I could hear, but I stood outside of Sal's room and watched.

Henrietta paused. She used her walker to help make a wide, gradual u-turn until she faced Sal. The two of them talked for a bit, and I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like she was smiling.

When Sal came back, he told me the double date was on.

MOON WARS

SUMMER 1999

Moon Wars. It was the title of our competition, so it had to live up to the hype.

We could all feel the tension when we met up for milkshakes at The Buck Snort Resort. It couldn't have been a tighter race. Nutty and I were sitting pretty with three wins apiece, and Milkers had two.

Nutty didn't look pretty, though. He showed up with a whole pile of new war wounds, the worst we'd ever seen. He'd been hit in the mouth, and his bottom lip had been split open. It had grown fat, and the scar tissue formed a jagged, maroon line. Nutty's left eye was puffy and half-shut, and although it hadn't turned black, it was on its way. Long, pink scratches and short, red cuts covered his body, interrupted by the occasional discoloration of bruises too fresh to fully reveal themselves on the surface of his skin.

The chit-chat didn't last long that night. We got right down to business.

"Up to this point, Moon Wars has been a grueling battle of brains and brawn," Nutty said. "It's tested our courage and our manhood, but this was all just a warm-up. Mooning is an art form, gentlemen. It's much more than pulling your pants down and bending over. It's a way of communicating. Rookie mooners can get themselves into trouble. They're the type you see sitting in a principal's office or getting chased down by some guy who can't take a joke. But a real mooner already knows the reaction he's about to get as he's unbuckling his belt."

Nutty handed us note cards with a mooning checklist that had to be completed in order. The first was called The Point and Laugh. You needed to get both. One or the other wouldn't cut it. The second was The Gross Out. The witness had to say either "eww," "gross," or "disgusting." A variation wouldn't count. The third one was called The Bird. The target had to flip you off. The fourth and final moon on the list was called The Freeze. Your target had to look like they'd seen a ghost. They couldn't move or blink for at least five seconds.

"A moon only counts if all three of us are around, and the event will continue until there's a winner. Before each moon, you have to announce who your target is. If you get a reaction you weren't looking for, you need to start over. Any questions?"

"Yeah. Does it have to be a full moon to count?" Milkers asked.

"Whatever gets the job done. If you can check off every moon by showing a centimeter of your crack, then more power to you."

"Nice," Milkers said, sounding like he might just give that a try.

"Let the games begin. Moon away, my friends. Moon away."

"Let's head to Alley Cat," I said. "It's not a bad place to start off."

"Sounds good to me," Milkers said.

Nutty didn't say a thing for a while, but he didn't disagree, so we started off toward the bowling alley.

"Hey, if I drop my pants right now would one of you point and laugh?" Milkers asked.

"You bet," Nutty said. "You could use a head start, rook."

“Okay, then, my target for this moon is Nutty,” Milkens declared as he dropped his pants and pointed his butt.

Nutty gave him the bird and said, “Oops. Looks like you went out of order. Better start over.”

I got a kick out of that, and Milkens laughed, too, but I could tell that he was really counting on Nutty to give him an easy one. Milkens has always been pretty gullible. I remember one time I got him to believe that women who have triplets are able to grow a third nipple.

When we made it to the lanes, we decided to play it cool for a while rather than get kicked out right off the bat for indecent exposure, so we got ourselves some smelly old shoes and a lane.

I laced up my brown on browns and glanced around to see if there were any easy targets for the point and laugh. Not the best crowd, but one person did come to mind. Dexter Stubbs thinks just about anything is funny. If you told the guy his pet dog just got run over, he’d probably get a good chuckle out of it.

I could see that Nutty and Milkens were eyeing up the crowd as well, so I figured it would be best to strike first. We picked our bowling balls, and I said I’d start things off. As Milkens entered our names, I glanced over at Dexter so I could time it just right.

We never used the same name twice when we bowled, so whoever entered the names usually took a few minutes to come up with something good for everyone. One time the only other people bowling were obvious out-of-towners. There were five of them, and they all had their letterman’s jackets on. They were cocky as hell, and we were

annoyed before we even had our shoes tied. Nutty picked the names that time. When I got my first strike, I looked up and saw “Scuzz On Lane 7” flashing on the screen. That was just about the best game I ever bowled, so eventually one of those guys spotted my name. I almost got pounded by five football players, but Nutty was always good at talking people into or out of just about anything, so we survived another day.

Dexter waited for his ball to return so he could take a crack at a seven-ten split. I hiked down my pants and underwear. My shirt was long enough to cover me up until I bent over. I walked right up to the line, and shouted out, “Hey, Dexter!” I bent over and executed the two-handed granny roll that little kids use.

I could hear him laughing right away. I didn’t even bother to look back at first. I was curious to see how many pins I’d knock down. I banked on the fact that Dexter had his pointer finger aimed directly at me, and I was right. For the record, I knocked down seven pins. I turned around, stuck my finger in the air, bent it, and straightened it again as if to say, “Chalk one up, boys. One down, three to go.”

Within the next couple of hours, all three of us had The Point and Laugh checked off. Nutty was the only one who went for The Gross Out that night. He went after Marybeth Tucker, and she said just about every word related to the ones he was hoping to hear, but no dice. The night ended with Nutty back at the starting line and Milkers and me one step ahead.

The next evening, Nutty evened the score in a hurry, but things slowed down until we grabbed a bite to eat at The Pudgy Seagull. Judging by our mood, I thought we had

sort of thrown in the towel for the night. That Milkens, though, he's always catching you off guard.

A group of girls and a lady came in while we waited for our food. We sat on the barstools, and they took a booth directly behind us. The girls looked pretty young, I'd say somewhere around ten. The lady was probably in her thirties. I'd never seen them before. Maybe they were girl scouts who came up north to rough it but decided to eat out for dinner.

The thought of mooning these girls never even crossed my mind. Okay, it did for a second, but I thought it would be wrong. Nutty must have thought the same thing because he never made a move, either. Milkens, though, is another story. As our burgers were placed in front of us, he whispered that the girl in the pink shirt was his target.

I clearly remember that first bite of the burger. My sense of taste was soured by the sound of Milkens's belt unbuckling. The second bite didn't taste much better as my peripheral vision took in his shimmering and shaking, a clear attempt to lower his shorts.

I took a break from eating to try to clear my mind. I never had so much trouble swallowing a bite of food. Milkens must have succeeded in lowering his shorts because the next thing I know, I'm hearing a bunch of giggles. Milkens acted like he didn't have a clue. He leaned forward as much as possible and tore into that burger like a starved raccoon. He even took periodic breaks to lick every one of his fingers clean, a habit he exaggerates because it's one of my pet peeves.

The giggles continued pretty steadily for the next few minutes. They were only interrupted by the shushing of the girls' supervisor.

“Could I get one more cheeseburger, Alice?” he asked. “That first one tasted like more.”

That was one of Milkerc’s catch phrases.

Nutty and I were more than ready to leave, but I figured another half hour of watching Milkerc humiliate himself was deserving of my time.

Although the girls’ giggles lessened a bit as time went on, Milkerc kept them entertained. By the time his second cheeseburger came, I could honestly see a bead of sweat forming at the top of his forehead. He was desperate.

Halfway into his burger, Milkerc took a break and started up with some small talk.

“So, what’s new with Sal?” he asked.

Nutty and I both saw through his lame attempt and wanted to speed the whole process along.

“Finish your burger, Milkerc,” Nutty said. “And pull your shorts up, too. These girls have been tortured long enough.”

“The other day, I was doing a splendid job of cutting grass as always,” Milkerc said, “and this old lady starts freaking out. ‘Can’t you lower the blade on that,’ she screeched. ‘And don’t forget to trim the hedges. Last time, you missed a spot on those hedges.’ She honestly sat on her porch and watched me do the whole job. Some day, when I’m rich and famous, I’m going to wait for a moment like that, and I’ll say exactly what comes to mind.”

Milkerc took a mammoth bite out of his cheeseburger and plotted his next move as he chewed. I could see the wheels turning in that hot air balloon he calls a head.

Milkers knocked his napkin on the ground like a big klutz. Not the best acting job. He stretched out as far as he could without budging from his stool. Then he made a few lunges at it along with a bit of huffing and puffing to get the girls to watch his next move. When he knew that he had the girls' full attention, Milkers took one final stab at it.

This time his butt did leave the stool. He braced his fall the best he could, but the thud was plenty loud enough to draw everyone's focus to the giant heap curled around the bar stool. The giggles picked up to a roar while the woman did all she could to stifle the laughter. Milkers didn't budge. He slowly reached out to the napkin and brought it into his chest.

"That is so gross," we heard.

It was barely audible, but it was enough to turn all three of our heads. It was too late, though. It was impossible to tell who uttered the magical word.

"Who said that?" Milkers demanded, turning his head to face the girls while still lying on the floor.

Milkers stood and finally pulled his shorts up. "Who said it? Who said gross?"

Nothing.

Finally the lady spoke up.

"We're just trying to enjoy our meal. There's no need to bother us," she said.

"Listen, lady," Milkers said, "I wear my father's shorts, and yes, they are a little bit too big, and sometimes they slide down. But I don't see why that gives someone the right to call me gross."

"It was me," the girl in the pink shirt said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

I saw Milkers give a mini fist pump.

“That’s fine. No harm done.”

Milkers slapped some money down on the counter, shoved the remainder of his burger into his mouth, and headed for the door.

The following Friday was more of the same. Without going into all the hairy details, Milkers stumbled going for “The Bird” and was back at the beginning before he knew it. I played it cool, getting my “Gross Out” but not getting greedy. I learned from Milkers’s mistake. Nutty ended the night with a couple of victories, first getting a random woman to “eww” him, and then getting George Miller to give him the bird. He sure hit the lottery with that one. He happened to spot one of the angriest human beings I’ve ever seen.

We walked home that night, and when we came to Nutty’s house he said, “I’m going after both of you for The Freeze.”

“Shut up, man,” I said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Serious as a hemorrhoid, fellas. Your jaws are going to drop and your drool is going to form a pond. It’s going to be a full moon in Washburn.”

“Whatever, Nutty,” Milkers said. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Adios,” Nutty said.

“G’night, Nutty,” I hollered. By that time, half his body was already in the door.

The rest of the way home, Milkers and I wondered out loud what Nutty was up to, and we couldn’t come up with much. The only thing we thought up that made an ounce of sense was that Nutty was trying to lose on purpose, or at least start over. I mean,

picking Milkers and me as his targets was the equivalent of stopping to tell the guy guarding you in a game of basketball, “Listen up, I’m about to go to my right and pull up for a jumper.” Our consensus was that he didn’t want Moon Wars to end. It was his way of prolonging the fun.

Needless to say, the next night Milkers and I were curious what was about to happen as we moseyed on over to Nutty’s. Usually, when we swung by to get him, we had to ring his doorbell and wait a few minutes for him to hop out of the shower or finish off a sandwich. He was a funny guy in that way. He always said, “Watches and clocks are a big waste of time.”

This night was different, though. He popped out of the door just as we walked into the driveway. He must have been peering out the window.

“Geez, it’s like you’re a whole new man,” Milkers said. “Are you sure there’s no loose ends you need to tie up before we take off?”

“Funny,” Nutty replied. “So where are we headed? Where’s the hotspot for mooning on this fine night?”

“Let’s try the Pump n’ Munch,” I suggested. “Even if it’s a no go for mooning, we can say hi to the hottest cashier in the tri-county area. Big Jugs Jeanine could be down to her tank-top in this kind of heat.”

“I like your thinking,” Nutty said.

“Me too,” Milkers offered. I waited for it. Milkers’s compliments are usually backhanded. “You’re not as dumb as you look, Gildo.”

We were about halfway there when Nutty said he had to run back to his house. He said he forgot to put the dog outside. We gave him a hard time at first, but as soon as he mentioned how mad his folks would be we let up.

He told us to keep walking and that he'd meet us at the train tracks where they cross the river. It's a part of the city that's far from any neighborhoods and even further away from businesses or development. The overgrown grass, weeds, shrubs, and trees hide a stretch of the train tracks and river from any outside view.

"Remember, guys," he said as he started to take off. "Always leave the room with a joke."

Milkers and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. We were used to Nutty saying things that we didn't quite get. I noticed that Nutty looked down at his wrist. It was the first time I'd ever seen him wear a watch.

"I knew it was too good to be true when we didn't have to wait for him this time," I said.

When we got near the tracks, Milkers stopped and looked hard at the ground.

"Hey, check it out," he said with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old who just found a dollar bill. "Turtle. He's headed straight for the highway. Must be depressed or something."

"Maybe he just wants to get to the other side," I said.

Milkers was about as amused with my corny joke as I was with his. "Go ahead, Gil. Turn him around."

"Why don't you do it?" I asked. "Are you afraid of a helpless little turtle?"

“I don’t know what kind it is. Could be a snapper, you know.”

“Put a stick by its mouth, then, and see if it goes after it the way you went after those cheeseburgers last night. I think you should be classified as a snapper.”

“Look, there’s Bicycle Bernie. Maybe he’ll do it. Hey, Bernie,” Milkers yelled. “Come check this out.”

Bernie just looked at us at first, so we waved him over. He rode full speed and threw on the brakes at the last second, making a skid mark.

“What do you have there? A Western Painted turtle, huh?”

The man is a walking encyclopedia.

“We were going to turn him around,” Milkers said, “but didn’t want to get our hands chomped off. Could’ve been a snapper for all we kn—”

Milkers was interrupted by a whistle. It was the kind you hear at a baseball game or after a great performance. The kind where you stick two fingers in your mouth. The three of us turned our heads in the direction of the noise.

Milkers raised an arm, ready to point, and I heard him inhale, ready to let out a big laugh. The corners of my lips began to rise as I spotted a full moon down on the tracks. Nutty was bent over so far that we could see his head hanging upside-down between his legs. He looked at us and smiled.

A whistle started up again. This time, though, it was a different type. The train whistle blew once more as a memory flashed through my mind. The last time we were at this spot, we lined the tracks with anything we could find and guessed what they’d look like after the train finished squashing them. Some things were carried inches, some feet,

and some were dragged along and tossed so far away that it took a three-person manhunt to locate them again. Empty beer cans were torn in two, and full sodas exploded, leaving a mist of sugar. When we put ourselves next to the tracks, we were quiet and serious, scared for our lives. After the train and its danger passed by, we took another look at the flattened pennies and joked with each other, wondering if we'd look as strange as Abe Lincoln if the train got a hold of us.

Milkers's arm wasn't given the chance to be raised, his finger wasn't given the chance to point, and his big intake of air wasn't let out in the form of a laugh. The corners of my lips never moved high enough to form a real smile, either.

The three of us froze.

A massive hunk of metal sailed along toward Nutty, floating slowly like the tracks were water and the train was a boat. It was like the type of dream where you know exactly what's about to happen and you know exactly how to fix the problem, but you're stuck in the mud and can't do a thing about it.

I stared, mouth hanging open, until everything went dark and the moon vanished from sight.

MAY 2000

Margarita and I arrived at Riverside, went to Sal's room, and found him working on a crossword puzzle. He had an old brown suit on, and he looked pretty sharp. Usually he just kind of let his hair do its own thing, but I could tell he'd combed it to perfection on this day. Even his shoes glowed.

"Gil warned me you'd be a sight for sore eyes, but I had no idea."

I looked at her sleek red dress and the little white flower she wore in her long, dark hair. She was beautiful in a simple way, without all the make-up, or push-up bras, or jewelry.

"Word on the street is that this band really knows how to play," Sal said. "I think we're in for a treat."

Sal pulled a comb from his pocket and made sure his hair was just the way he wanted it. He grabbed his cribbage board and a deck of cards and told us he couldn't wait any longer to see Henrietta, so the three of us traveled down the hallway together.

"I know we're early," Sal said, "but I thought we could play a game of cribbage before heading down."

"That sounds terrific," Henrietta said.

She wore a long, blue skirt.

"You must be trying to break some hearts tonight, missy," Sal said.

We played a warm-up game of cribbage so Margarita could learn the rules, and then we played a game of guys versus girls. Sal sat facing the window, and part-way through the game, he noticed that the moon was visible even though it was still light out.

“Take a look at that, ladies,” Sal said. “The moon looks like a Nilla Wafer. If we only had a giant glass of milk to dip it in.”

When they turned and looked out the window, Sal moved our marker forward. When Henrietta turned back, she studied the board and giggled.

“I should’ve known,” she said. “For a second, I thought you were just being romantic.”

“Oh, there’s still plenty of time for that,” Sal said, winking.

After the game, we all made our way to the event. We entered the recreation room and noticed a few banners taped along the walls. A table was covered with a large bowl of punch, and plates were piled full of summer sausage, cheese, crackers, and fruit. At the head of the room, three gray-haired men tuned their instruments. A handful of residents sat along the walls in silence, waiting. Sal offered to get some punch for Henrietta. He pulled up to the table and went for the ladle but couldn’t quite reach it.

“I used to be able to get a lady a glass of punch,” Sal said.

Henrietta slid the punch bowl toward Sal. She grabbed two plastic cups and set them on the edge of the table.

“You still can,” she said.

Sal smiled and filled a cup, careful not to spill a drop. He handed it off and began to fill his own more recklessly. Beads of punch trickled down the side.

After I'd filled a glass for Margarita and me, Sal raised his arm and paused.

"To a lovely evening and even lovelier ladies," Sal said.

"Prost," Henrietta said.

"Cheers," I said.

"Salud," Margarita said.

The band started up, and they played a few songs while we talked and drank our punch.

When Sal polished his off, he licked his lips and reached again for the ladle, but the band started in with their first slow song of the night, "Love Me Tender."

"Nice night for a dance, eh?" Sal asked.

"Always is," Henrietta said.

"Would you do me the honor?" Sal asked. "That dance floor looks mighty lonely."

"Are you sure you can stand?"

"I'm willing to find out, and if I start to tip over, just let me go. No sense in taking both of us out."

Henrietta set her walker against the wall, rolled Sal to the center of the dance floor, and leaned in to help him up. Sal pushed off the armrests and braced his legs while Henrietta wrapped her arms around his body and held on. Sal paused, gained his balance, and made sure he could stand under his own power before he nudged the wheelchair out of the way. They moved with an unhurried ease. Sal closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose.

I asked Margarita if she'd like to dance, and we moved out near Sal and Henrietta. We were the only four on the dance floor.

I reached out and rested my hands on the small of Margarita's back, and she put her arms around my neck. I realized it was the first time we'd actually touched. As we made revolutions on the dance floor, I wished that song could have gone on forever.

JUNE 2000

Right after Nutty died, Rose gave me a small box filled with some of his possessions. I tucked most of it away in my closet, but something I did put to use were his CDs. Actually, that's about all I did for that week I lived in bed. Jimi Hendrix and his psychedelic guitar riffs met Janis Joplin's gritty passion met Otis Redding's silky voice. With each new sound came a glimpse into Nutty's world. I listened to his music over, and over, and over again. Eventually, when a song came to a close and a silent second or two followed, my mind played the start of the next before it poured out of the speakers. The music became ingrained in my very being. I stared at my ceiling and wondered how it was possible that I knew Nutty for less than one year but still felt certain I'd known him for a lifetime.

I discovered later on that a big chunk of the artists in Nutty's collection died young. I thought maybe they were all touched with something special that had to be used up swiftly or lost forever.

That gift of music wasn't the only way Rose saved me, though.

During the last week of school, Principal Knox called me into his office to congratulate me for turning things around as the year went on. There was a bit of small talk before he told me that Rose was the biggest reason I didn't get expelled from school at the start of the year. Principal Knox is a man of few words, so when he cleared his throat and stood up after telling me that, I knew he had really said our meeting was adjourned. So I asked my parents that night what he was talking about.

I found out that after I stormed out of the meeting that was held to decide my punishment for hitting Mrs. Tibbets, Rose barged in. I still don't know how she found out about the meeting, but my folks said she turned on the waterworks and told everyone what a good kid I am. She went on and on, and after she stopped, the punishment suggestions got much less harsh.

When the final bell of our freshman year rang out, Milkens and I did not carry on our tradition of riding off into Lake Superior.

"So, what should we do?" Milkens asked.

Margarita had already left to return home to Mexico, but she was on my mind, and I knew she would be for a long time. I thought back to everything she had told me about The Day of the Dead and how to celebrate.

"I say we go settle up on the bet we lost," I said.

We stopped at Frank's Pizza Palace and picked up two large pizzas, one with the works and one with extra cheese, before heading to the cemetery.

When we got there, Milkens and I strolled up and down the rows of headstones with pizzas in hand. We didn't spot Nutty's gravestone right away because neither of us had been there before. The handful of people we passed gave us funny looks, but it didn't matter.

From a distance, I saw two people leaned up against a giant maple tree, arms around each other, so I pointed ahead and Milkens gave a nod. As we approached, I recognized that it was Nutty's parents, but they were so wrapped up in one another that they almost looked like one person. Neither of them budged.

Milkers cleared his throat, and it startled them. They glanced up through wet eyes. All four of us looked at each other, but nobody knew what to say.

All the hate I'd once felt for them had drifted away, and the blame was gone, too. I just missed my friend.

"Special delivery," Milkers said finally, trying to somehow break up the awkward moment. He knelt down and set one of the boxes on the ground.

"You're probably wondering why we brought pizza," I said. "It's kind of a long story."

They looked confused as they finally wiped their eyes.

"We've got time," Mr. McNutt said.

It was the first we'd seen of him since the night in the bar. I felt like I couldn't explain or apologize well enough if I used a thousand words, and all I got out right then were four.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

Mr. McNutt nodded. I stuck out my hand, but I couldn't bear to look at him, so I focused on a single blade of grass while wondering if he'd shake the hand of a guy who once spat in his face.

He did. And as we shook, I looked up once again and met his gaze.

Milkers apologized, too, and I opened the box with the works and rested it in front of Nutty. I sat down and opened the other box for the rest of us.

We ate pizza while Milkers and I told them all about the summer we'd never forget, and the McNutts told stories about Nutty we'd never heard.

Before leaving, Rose stood up and hugged Milkens first and then me. It wasn't a little hug. She hung on tight, and I hugged her back, and we stayed like that. We shared our hurt without letting words get in the way.

We let go of each other after an eternity.

They began to walk away, but Rose stopped and turned around. Her dirty blond hair had grown back ever since her confession about the cancer, and it was just long enough to form small waves that stuck close to her head but curled out in all directions. She started to hum, and I recognized the song from the start. After a while, she added some words. Her voice was rough, and worn, and ragged. I could imagine how beautiful it was before the accident, but the truth is, I loved the way her voice sounded at that very moment.

The rest of us joined in and sang "Blue Skies" along with her, quietly at first, but eventually we sang just as loudly as Nutty would have. She and Mr. McNutt turned away again. This time they continued on, but we all kept on singing.

Milkens decided to head home not long after that. I asked him to drop by my house and tell my folks I might be a while.

By that time, the sun had already started its downward plunge, so I watched and waited as it fell from the sky, disappearing into yesterday, and tomorrow, and today.

I pulled my comic book out of my backpack and added the final drawings to what I'd worked on all year long.

It ended with an escape from a black hole.

And a universe that's been saved.

And a world that's just begun.

And a handshake.

And a hug.

From a distance, I spotted Bicycle Bernie riding along the winding, pebbly sidewalk that cut through much of the cemetery. Nutty's story about Bernie and the train flooded my brain. I thought about the combined feeling of invincibility and insignificance he described, and I wished more than anything that I would have figured out there was more to his story than I realized. I wished more than anything that I would have saved him.

That train still appears in my dreams and nightmares, and it even flashes across my mind while I'm awake. My best friend, Benny McNutt, died with a smile on his face and his pants around his ankles. I'm never sure whether to laugh or cry when I picture that moment, so I still find myself doing both, sometimes at the same time.

Since I had arrived at the cemetery, the sky had turned from a brilliant blue to midnight blue and finally into absolute darkness. I swiveled my head back and forth, up and down, and at first, the endless black curtain felt suffocating.

But I remembered how my obsession with astronomy started back in the third grade. We were learning about the solar system when Ms. Lukens told us to close our eyes and envision something that I haven't stopped thinking about ever since.

"Imagine the last time you grabbed a handful of sand on a beach and think about all the individual grains that made up that handful," she said. "Now picture all the grains

of sand it takes to fill that entire beach. If you counted each grain of sand on every single beach and desert on Earth, it would not compare to the number of stars in the sky.”

So I looked closer. The stars poked so many tiny holes through that thick black fabric of the atmosphere that it didn't seem quite so dark anymore. I turned my body and noticed the biggest source of light. The giant moon was hoisted high above me, and it took on an orange tint that night. It looked like it had been fired through the black like a cannonball.

A shiver swept through my body and I began to feel like everything and nothing all at once. I wondered if that might be the closest I'd ever come to understanding Benny and his decision to leave.

Everyone and everything I've ever lost in my entire life mixed into my sadness until I finally thought about all that remained. I still had Sal to check in on, and Milkers and I had a trip to Florida to look forward to. We decided that Lake Superior had enough of our dust in it, so we suggested to our parents that our families take a vacation together. Surprisingly, they thought it was a good idea, so before I knew it, I'd be out of Wisconsin for the first time in my life, cleaning off in the ocean this time.

The path had circled Bernie around, and he faced me, pedaling slowly, backpack and all. I remembered the way he raised his hands and covered my eyes right before Nutty joined forces with the train, and then I wondered, like I did once before, if Bernie really is Washburn's angel. Not one with super powers, but someone who does everything he can to watch over and protect our own little world. As he veered off the

path and headed my way, I decided I'd challenge him to a chess match so I could get to know the real Bernie Shnorkl.

The glowing full moon rested among a flawless bouquet of stars, lighting the board and all its pieces just enough to play.

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