Kilkelly’s Heroes

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Jeremiah S. Kinney

Barbara Bogue

Thesis Advisor

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The stories in this collection have been spinning about in my mind over the past year. I have been influenced by Joyce, Robinson, Twain, and others as I have sought to bring to life this group of fourth graders. My desire was to create a collection in which all the characters belonged to the same little world and to create a group of characters stronger than any one individual among them. To do so, I decided to write in such a way that each story becomes more than just a chapter in a book, that each story, while lending weight to the overall theme of the collection, might be able to stand alone with its own theme. I have put them in the order which seems most logical, though I imagine they might be shuffled endlessly, except for the last story, and still achieve the same effect.

With this collection I hope I am able to convey my belief that no one is without spiritual free will, regardless of environment or background. I have desired that these stories be witness to my own faith that Jesus Christ is Savior of all those that seek Him by creating a group of characters confronted with a wide range of hardship, always empowered by their own privilege of choice, given the option to wander in confusion or to emerge from that confusion by way of the only Way, Truth, and Life. In so doing, I pray the reader will have found this same hope upon turning the final page.

Of course, this work remains in progress. While I have written five stories to satisfy the requirements of an honors thesis, many others, focusing on even more of the children found in Mrs. Kilkelly's Griffin Elementary fourth grade classroom, remain spinning about in my mind. Someday, Lord willing, these stories too, will find their way through my pen and onto paper.

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The New Kid

On the first day of the fourth grade, a really skinny kid who looked as if he’d grown up at the North Pole strayed into the room, releasing his mother’s hand at the doorway, though she remained there for several seconds watching him. After wandering around the room, he sat down right behind me. Mrs. Kilkelly had written name tags for each of us and taped them on the front of our desks the day before. His said, “Graham.”

Graham was a pretty quiet kid, and I never even heard a whisper out of him during classtime. We fourth graders spent the first month of school learning all about the new kid, our new teacher, and her new rules, both in the classroom and on the playground. It didn’t take long for all of us to learn what Mrs. Kilkelly would allow, and what Mrs. Kilkelly could not see. For instance, jumping out of swings was not allowed, but we could leap out at the bottom of our arc, letting the momentum of the swing send us running for about twenty feet, as long as she wasn’t looking. (She was pretty good at spotting kids flying through the air, though.) Most girls gossiped underneath the jungle gym, but a couple of the tougher ones played freeze-tag with the boys.

Eventually all the kids began to laugh at Graham because he was a slow runner, and everyone learned that if you tripped him from behind at recess, he’d fall down, and he wouldn’t fight back. And if you laughed at him he’d just turn away. After a while, he earned the rather uninspired nickname “Graham Cracker,” which was soon followed by variations like “Cracker Face,” etc. He was also called “Fuzzhead” because he didn’t have any hair. Well, he had some, but it was cropped very close on top. Most kids thought he looked like an alien. I remember thinking that he just looked kind of sad sometimes.
Graham never sat on the swings and watched us play, which surprised us a little, since we figured he’d eventually retire from the torment he went through by continuing to play with us. We sometimes wished he’d give up and face the fact that he was no good at freeze-tag, but he never would, and Mrs. Kilkelly, on principle, said that everyone should be included if they so desired, so he kept playing freeze-tag.

Graham missed school about once every two weeks, and, pretty soon, he developed the reputation for being a cutter. When kids confronted him about this truant disposition, he would just shrug, mutter an apology, and walk away. Eventually, since no one could ever get a reaction from him, most of the kids found it more fun to whisper behind his back than to boldly scorn him to his face, though both occurred daily.

On Fridays all of us would put the contents of our desks--schoolbooks, school boxes, tablets, trinkets, and as yet undiscovered spitwad arsenals--into small lockers, individually assigned and stacked like post office boxes in the corner of the classroom, to prevent weekend theft. I remember one Monday when I was laboring over the combination on mine. It wouldn’t open no matter how often or how loudly I banged the lock against the locker. After a few minutes of frustration, a pale hand reached over my shoulder and took the lock. It was Graham. He had the thing open in a jiffy and then explained that he had a lock on his bike at home so he’d had plenty of “lock practice” already. Then we started talking about bikes, and it sounded like his was pretty cool.

Another time, Graham helped me at lunch. We were going through the line, and it was my turn to pay the lady. Some kid pushed from behind just when I was picking up my tray. I lost my balance, and my tray and food fell all over the floor. I felt like a total nerd. While I was on
the ground scrambling to clean up the mess and salvage what food I could, Graham came out of
the line, bent over, and helped me pick it all up. Kids were getting tired of waiting and started
pushing. Jason Henderson was next after me, and, because of the pushing, he fell on Graham.
Jason got mad at Graham and complained that dweebs should stay out of the way. Everyone who
saw the incident and heard Jason’s insult laughed, ignoring the reprimand from the money-lady.
Having saved face, Jason stalked off to his seat to devour his lunch piggishly, shoving two or
three mouthfuls into his mouth at once and not bothering to swallow before the next over-sized
load was inserted. Nobody noticed that Graham was hurt, except me.

Such was life that school year for Graham. He laughed sometimes, but that was only
when he didn’t think anyone was looking. Despite her good intentions, Mrs. Kilkelly remained
blissfully oblivious to the mistreatment, concentrating on beating into our skulls that phonics was
fun and that we would indeed use our multiplication tables someday. Some of us learned, and
others continued to pretend to learn, and still others were compelled to attend multiple parent-
student-teacher conferences. I don’t know where Graham fit into the overall scheme of academic
progress.

During the relatively mild first week of March, near the end of the school year, we were
playing kickball at recess even though snow still lingered on the ground in dirty patches, freeze-
tag having fallen out of fashion after we had discovered that it was the preferred game of the
third graders too. I was one of the captains that day. About halfway through choosing teams, I
was going to pick Graham, but everyone already on my team said, no, I shouldn’t pick him, they
didn’t want him. So, well, I just picked someone else. I looked at Graham, and he just looked at
me and shrugged. I must have been his only friend because we did talk sometimes, when no one
else was around to play with. I uneasily justified not picking him by thinking to myself that we really didn’t play together very much so we weren’t that close as friends.

In the middle of the game, Ryan March popped the ball up to left field where Graham was playing. (Graham was the last pick, so I ended up with him after all.) The ball flew high in the air, came down, hit Graham in the chest, and bounced away from him, rolling farther into the outfield. By then Ryan was rounding third, and since Graham’s throw was so weak, it barely rolled to Nathan Carlson, the first baseman. So Ryan got a home run, driving in two others and putting us behind by one. Some people yelled at Graham (it was his third error), but I didn’t say anything. I wanted to tell them all to shut up and leave him alone but couldn’t force the words from my brain to my tongue.

The game progressed normally, and we found ourselves down by three with two outs in the last inning before recess was over. Michael Bristow was on third, and Jason Henderson was on second, and somehow, Graham had managed to get on first. And I was up. The pitch rolled in, a little bouncy, and with all I had, I kicked.

The ball soared into the outfield, over everybody’s heads. Michael scored easily, and Jason went running in too. Graham was moving pretty slowly, so I shouted from behind an encouragement to run faster. He stopped at third, but I wanted a grand slam and yelled at him to go for home. Hesitantly, he left the base, looking to me for reassurance. I yelled another, “Run!” so he did, but it was too late. By the time he was halfway there, the ball came to Ryan at third, who jogged up behind Graham and threw the ball at Graham’s ankles. Graham’s feet got tangled up, and, with arms outstretched, he fell hard. Everyone on our team was mad since we’d lost. Michael walked up to Graham and yelled, “Stupid.” Jason said something that would have gotten
his mouth washed out at my house, and David Hooper called him a dork, or something with the
same connotation. I was pretty angry as well. I yelled at Graham, but still don’t remember what
I said. Still sitting on the ground, with his head down, Graham said softly, while rubbing his
ankle, that he was sorry. We all just walked away.

That was a Friday. We had the weekend off, and when we came back Monday, Graham
wasn’t there. Maybe he’d finally had enough, we wondered. I kept seeing his face in my mind,
and the grimacing expression he’d worn when I’d spoken so harshly to him plagued me. He
missed Tuesday and Wednesday and the rest of that week and the next week too, and my guilt
grew and grew. Finally, on Thursday of the second week, Mrs. Kilkelly walked to the front of
the classroom for pledge-of-allegiance time and announced that she had some sad news. She
spent a long time talking about some disease and something about white cells in your blood,
confusing us because science time wasn’t until after the after-lunch recess. Then she told us:
“Class, Graham hasn’t been here the last two weeks because he was taken to the hospital.” She
fidgeted with a piece of chalk in her hand, staring at it as though it were giving her the words she
was speaking. “He hasn’t wanted anyone to know, but--” she paused and sniffed. Her eyes were
red, and most of us boys wondered if she were going to cry. Our teacher started the sentence
over. “He hasn’t wanted anyone to know, but, for the last two years--” This time she lost it. The
end of the sentence was absorbed by her tears. “Last night, Graham passed away.” She’d tried to
say that one fast, but it choked her.

Nobody moved a muscle. After a minute of uncomfortable twitching, Mrs. Kilkelly came
over to my desk, smiled a small smile through her tears, and said, “I’m supposed to give you
this.” With a slightly trembling hand, she held out a light blue piece of paper folded in half.
After taking it from her with a small degree of hesitation, I opened it up and saw words hardly legible scrawled in pencil on it. It said:

I wanted you to have my bike. The lock combination is 24-4-18. But I won’t be able to help you with it. Be careful of the left hand brake. It’s not as good as the right one. And oil the chain once a week. I hope you like the bike and have fun riding it.

Your friend,

Graham
Ryan March was the kind of kid most people wanted to punch in the nose. It seemed as though every day Mrs. Kilkelly would have to send him to the principal’s office, and he was paddled at least once every three weeks or so. Most of the boys loved him; he was our Darth Vader, and we his stormtroopers. Conversely, if the girls had known what a “hit” was, they surely would have put one out on him way back in kindergarten.

Ryan was afraid of no one and respected no one. He could beat up any boy in our class or below—with the probable exception of Jason Henderson, his loyal, hired thug—and half of the class above us. Occasionally he’d get clobbered into the ground by a fifth grader, but, although Ryan had bitten off more than he could chew that time, he’d still get up and call insults after his opponent as soon as the fifth grader had turned his back to walk away.

That is why it was a bit unusual when Ryan came to school with a black eye one day in the middle of November. Before school started all of us boys surrounded him and listened with awe to his explanation. For someone to have administered this kind of a beating to our leader, small though our leader was, this mystery-punisher would have to have been huge.

As we all took our seats awaiting Griffin Elementary’s morning bell, Mrs. Kilkelly glanced across her classroom with a smile; then her jaw dropped and her eyebrows exploded upward as soon as she spotted Ryan:

“Ryan, what on earth!”

We all laughed. Ryan, who was automatically placed in the front row every time the seating arrangement was changed, sort of swelled with that air of matter-of-factness that TV
heroes like Knight Rider or MacGyver usually assumed. "Two six-graders did it last night when I threw a rock at their bikes."

Just behind me and to my left, I heard Molly Wills whisper to Courtney Dobrowsky that she wished she’d done it. Courtney echoed her sentiment.

Our teacher, with her hands on her hips, began to scold Ryan. "Why did you do something as vicious as that?"

"’Cause they’re stupid."

Baffled by his logic, Mrs. Kilkelly’s next response was interrupted by the morning bell, announcing the start of seven more hours of tedious labor for us. We all rose mechanically and, on cue, began to recite the pledge to our flag. When the pledge was finished, we took our seats, expecting Mrs. Kilkelly to allow Ryan to finish his story. Instead, she pursed her lips, which turned her mouth into a small, red dot on her face, and gave him a sidelong glare that said, "It’s not as funny as you think, young man, and if you were my child, why, I’d . . . ."

Of course, Ryan was a hero at recess that day. Though he was the shortest boy in the class, he was the fastest runner. His personality was blunt, and his comments razor-sharp. Ryan never wasted time being polite; therefore, what Ryan said was law to us, and it never occurred to us to question him. We all wanted to know who the sixth graders were, the Goliaths he’d dared to defy. He said he didn’t know their names, but if we passed them at recess or bathroom break or lunch he’d point them out. In the meantime, he said, we’d better start playing some freeze-tag, since we were wasting precious recess minutes.

The black eye became inspiration for Michael Bristow, Jason Henderson, and myself. The three of us, particularly impressed, thrilled with visions of glory all throughout the day about
walking up to random sixth graders and slugging them in the stomach. The price of slugging sixth graders in the stomach, though, would be the sacrifice of our insignificant, weak frames and the receipt of split lips, bleeding noses, and other scars that could last anywhere from a week to a lifetime. A more subtle, more covert, more tactical approach for revenge would have to be instituted, so we resorted to flipping peas during lunch.

If we were actually so bold as to buy our lunches at the school cafeteria, we were given few choices. The cafeteria ladies would fill up a tray and give it to a kid, who could then select his own chips and beverage (small cartons of skim, two per cent, or chocolate milk). That kid would surrender his milk money and carry his tray to his class’s table. Invariably, every tray would hold a main entree, a vegetable, and a dessert, besides the milk and chips. The vegetable serving was always disgusting. The only boy in the fourth grade who ate his vegetables was Jason Henderson, who would eat tree bark if you put ketchup or chocolate syrup on it. However, we weren’t allowed to leave the lunch room without eating everything on our trays. This policy usually exacted some rather proud moments of creativity on our part. One time we smuggled vegetables in a Doritos bag, passing it down the row until it got to the end of the table. The boy at the end emptied the contents into the trash can right next to him and then passed the bag back to be refilled, resmuggled, and re-emptied. On other occasions, we put maybe a quarter of the serving on the table, set our tray on top, and pressed it down firmly yet casually. The soft peas or carrots or green beans stuck to the bottom of the trays, and the juices were cleaned up with the swipe of a napkin. Some times we were caught, and sometimes we weren’t. We felt like the Allied heroes from *The Great Escape*. 

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With Ryan’s black eye as our standard, we had a new method and motivation for ridding ourselves of the peas served to us that day. Ryan wasn’t sitting with Michael, Jason, and me because he was always required to sit right next to Mrs. Kilkelly where she could keep her eye on him. The three of us decided, though, that we were going to get even for Ryan, vicariously. We spilled our peas from their little rectangular white styrofoam plates, letting them roll around on our trays. Turning the styrofoam plates upside down, we tilted them by setting the front end on top of the raised, surrounding ledge of the tray. Now we had a ramp, a launching pad.

The cafeteria was set up in long rows of tables on a bland green concrete floor. Each class of twenty to thirty kids sat at its own table, a string of impressionable minds on one side of the table and another string on the other, with the teacher in the midst, just like Jane Goodall. In our class, we drew an uncrossable line in the middle. The girls sat on one end of our table, and the boys at the other. Mrs. Kilkelly acted as the buffer or demilitarized zone, dividing us and maintaining a fragile peace.

Michael, Jason, and I were sitting at the far end of the table. In front of us and two tables away, we watched the sixth grade boys wolf down their food, laugh loudly, sneak an armpit noise when their teacher wasn’t looking, and snort in contempt. In contempt of what, we didn’t always know, but sixth graders were always in contempt of something. Sometimes they would take a perfectly good brownie or cupcake, and one of them would bring his fist down with a fury upon it as filling would spray all over somebody. It was a disgrace, so I selected a pea from my tray, set it at the bottom of the gentle grade that formed my artillery, flicked it, and ducked.

The third grade table separated ours from the sixth grade, and the third grade girls sat directly in front of us on their end of their table. Apparently, I hadn’t struck the pea hard enough
because it hit a little blonde third grader squarely in the back of the head. She turned around (we quickly looked away), having felt the contact, looked blankly behind her, and turned back to face her friends, unsure of what, if anything at all, had happened.

We slowly raised our heads above the table, exchanged glances, and then, all at once, burst into laughter. After the first second or so, we concealed our glee as best we could beneath our hands, so as not to alert the girl we’d hit. The whole event was hilarious, but we knew we had to flick the peas harder. Michael lined one up and let it fly, but it sailed over the sixth graders. After several more attempts, we finally found the range, and began bombarding the sixth graders with peas.

Well, in summary, the third grade girls weren’t as dumb as we thought. They figured it out, and, just like girls, they told on us, which got us in trouble with the third grade teacher, Mrs. Dobrowsky, with Mrs. Kilkelly, and with the principal, Mrs. Peroni. Although we promised to be good, we got in trouble for a lot of things in the few weeks following, usually for foolish things like picking fights, getting beat up (the day of the pea-bombing, four sixth graders cornered us after school and practiced their boxing skills on us), and making faces whenever the sixth grade walked past our open classroom door. We even began sabotaging the third grade girls’ recess plans. Revenge was no longer vicarious.

About a month after the beginning of all this, a couple of notable events occurred in a domino-like style. First, Ryan came into class with his right and left biceps bruised up; one was turning blue, and the other a more odd shade of yellowish-green. Second, Mrs. Kilkelly caught us whispering by the water fountain during bathroom break about our plans for recess, which included rocks, sticks, and, of course, the sixth grade.
Third, Mrs. Kilkelly called our parents. A meeting was scheduled for the next day between Mrs. Kilkelly, my parents, the Henderson, Mr. Bristow (Michael’s mother was long passed away), and the three of us. The Marches said they couldn’t come, so Ryan and his parents wouldn’t be there. When my parents got the phone call, the evening of the day of Ryan’s bruised arms, they were upset, and after Dad said, “Jared, tell me your side of all this,” I knew they knew it all and were merely testing my integrity. Lying would only have deepened the amount of trouble in which I found myself wading.

The meeting was set for the next day, precisely at three o’clock. I warned Michael and Jason to tell the honest truth since we were already in for it. Ryan was more upset, though, than the three of us. In fact, at recess, he fumed.

“I can’t believe Mrs. Kilkelly called your parents too!” Ryan threw a stone angrily at the ground.

“Well, we’re the ones who’ve been gettin’ in trouble,” Michael noted stoically.

“But it’s not you. It’s my . . . my bruises.”

“We should just tell them that we’re just standing up for you.” Jason plopped himself down on the ground, yanking up handfuls of grass morosely. “That it’s the sixth graders’ fault. Not us.”

“No!” Ryan blurted. “You can’t say that.”

“Why not?”

Ryan balked. Then, “Promise not to tell?” He looked each of us in the eye and received a nod. Taking off his jacket, he untucked his T-shirt from his blue jeans and lifted it up, turning around. About halfway up his back was another bruise, this one black and purple.
“Whoa!” was all I could think to say.

“They got you good,” Michael evaluated.

Ryan let his shirt drop. It drooped half untucked around his waist, blown upward a little by the light breeze of the late-lingering, but now receding, November Indian summer. “I know.”

Just then the whistle that signaled the end of recess resounded shrilly across the playground. All the kids began running to get in line, a herd of lemmings eager for more multiplication tables. We ignored it. “That’s why you can’t tell. Anybody. If the school finds out then they’ll all think I’m a wimp.”

At the meeting that evening, the heat didn’t come down like we thought it would. Mostly, the grown-ups talked, and Michael, Jason, and I just sat there. I remember Jason even fell asleep for part of it. My mom frowned when he snored, but I laughed because he woke himself up. Michael was paying attention the whole time, I think, but it all went over my head. The adults, I could tell, were intentionally cloaking their language, though sometimes they addressed us directly. For instance, I was asked right off, why we’d been misbehaving (so uncharacteristically for me).

“Sixth graders are so mean all the time,” I said, affecting my most innocent and victimized tone of voice, “so, I don’t know, when they beat up Ryan we just got mad, I guess.”

Having stammered through that hedged explanation, I awaited the next question, but they addressed it to Michael instead. “Which sixth graders?”

“Ryan didn’t know their names.”

Everyone looked at each other with that “Mmmm-hmmm” look. Michael just sat, fidgeting, nervous, staring blankly ahead, in his chair, same as me. I don’t remember the rest of
the meeting very well at all. They talked about Ryan, the results of his encounters with the sixth graders, and the effect it had had on our behavior. Then, more “Blah, blah, blah,” and it was over. After that, I went home with my parents, suspecting that I’d gotten off scot-free.

Instead, I got paddled. Hard. Of course, I had to apologize. And I had to memorize an apology to present to Mrs. Kilkelly. And I had to tell Mom and Dad everything bad that I’d done at school recently—which I reported nearly thoroughly, although without one hundred percent accuracy. But, as I often found myself doing as a kid, I had to justify my way out, and as soon as I started talking, I wished I’d never begun.

“But it’s just not only us,” I pleaded at the end.

“Jared, you can’t keep blaming any mysterious sixth graders.” My dad, sitting in his regular chair in the living room, picked me up and put me on his knee, a position which was familiar but nearly outgrown. “We’ve told you—you can’t fight the whole sixth grade class for something that a couple of kids did, not to you, but to someone else. There’s too much about that that doesn’t make sense, that isn’t very wise, Jared. You know we’re glad you’re standing up for your friend, but—well, why did we spank you?”

“For fighting,” I responded with a sigh. That answer I had down cold.

“Exactly. And you know better, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but—” The answer that came next was one I tried with all my might to suppress, but to no avail. “But, they keep beating him up. I mean, they just won’t stop.”

Dad set me down on the floor, probably because his leg was falling asleep. “What are you talking about?”
There were two right things to do--keep the secret to which Ryan had sworn me or seek some counsel and explanation wiser than mine--but I could only do one. I decided it was time for some answers. “Well, Ryan has some new bruises from those sixth graders all the time.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, first his eye, then on his arms, and then--then a big one on his back. But, Dad, you can’t tell anyone. It’s a secret!” I implored him to understand.

“Why a secret?” He put his hand on my shoulder to calm me down. It did, somewhat, but I still felt horrible.

“So no one will know.” Realizing this was more definition than explanation, I continued, “So no one will think he’s a wimp.”

“Does he hide it? Does he have any other signs that he’s been in fights?”

I squirmed. This felt so wrong, but right, a dilemma that had to be explored, that would never go away without a direct confrontation. Moral quandaries in the fourth grade seldom exceeded the question about whether to horseplay in the bathroom or not to horseplay in the bathroom. To stop now and clam up would leave a hole unfillable in my conscience. I wanted the whole thing just to go away. Tears of confusion began to well up in my eye. I felt bewildered and frustrated, and those tears, beyond my control, made me feel foolish and very angry at myself. I didn’t want to cry, especially in front of my father.

“Well, sometimes he wears long sleeve shirts so no one can see anything. He had scratches on his neck, on the side of it, but those were from a cat he tried to throw out of a tree to see if it would land on its feet.”
Dad smiled, instilling a modicum of confidence in me. “Were you there when all that happened?”

“No, he told me about it,” I answered with some regret, wishing I’d been there to help with the cat. “He covered those up with wearing a turtleneck for a couple days.”

“So people wouldn’t think it was the sixth graders?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I shrugged, but then, “No, wait. No, because that was before the sixth graders punched him in the eye.”

“Oh, I see,” Dad said, as we looked eye to eye. “Well, Jared, I guess we’ve talked enough about all this.” He pointed his finger at me. “If I hear of any more fighting, it’s the belt again. Understand?” I nodded. “And leave the third grade girls alone, you big bully, you hear?” I nodded again. We hugged, and I turned around to go to my room and play and think. As I turned from him, Dad gave me a little pat on the rear end, and, as far as I was concerned, that sealed it. Finally, it was over.

When I went to my room I looked around, surveying it, trying to think of something to do. A moment later I heard Mom calling me for dinner. Glad for the diversion, I slouched downstairs and plopped down at the table. My sisters were already seated, but I ignored them. I distractedly mushed the meatloaf in with the green beans, eventually cleaned my plate, didn’t talk to anyone. My family pretty much left me alone; my sisters were under direct orders to mind their business. After I was finished, I got up from the table, but Mom said, “Aren’t you forgetting something?” I turned around and then remembered my dishes. As I gathered my plate, silverware, and cup and put them in the dishwasher, Mom asked if I were feeling all right.

“Yeah, I’m just kinda tired. I’m gonna go upstairs.”
“Did you do your homework?”

“Yeah, just spelling words. I already did ‘em.”

“Okay, honey.”

Up in my bedroom, I stared at my Legoes and was bored before I even started to play with them, very unusual for me. Then I picked up my baseball card album and another box containing more cards. There was always work to be done with a baseball card collection, so many organizational possibilities, statistics to learn, players to study. But despite the fondness I held for this hobby, I couldn’t shake what I’d done, and nothing Ryne Sandberg’s card could say could make it go away.

I’d begun to rationalize the whole thing. All I’d done was tell my Dad, but my sense of honor, I suppose, continued to bother me. Finally, I decided it was time to put this to rest as well. I dropped my cards back in the box. I’d been sorting by teams, and the Houston Astros were pretty dull anyway since I didn’t have any Nolan Ryans. My parents wouldn’t have let me go outside since dusk set in around seven o’clock (and it was just about that time), but I had to see Ryan and tell him what I’d done, tell him it was time to show an adult, tell him it was time to let them handle something for once. I sneaked out the kitchen door, into the garage, and, after mounting my brown and blue Huffy, complete with banana seat, I stole into the street.

Late November evenings in central Indiana are usually pretty nippy. That night was no exception. Right away, the chill breeze bit me on my exposed neck and sucked the energy from me. The Marches only lived two blocks away, but it seemed longer. En route, I pedaled past the Bristows’. Michael, I could see, was sitting in their front room, watching TV, so I stopped to see
if he would come with me. A little moral support while confronting Ryan March would be invaluable.

“Dad, I’m going outside to play with Jared,” Michael called into another room, after I’d explained to him what had transpired at my house during the last few hours.

“Back by eight. Okay?”

“Okay.” Michael grabbed his jacket from the house and his shiny chrome BMX Mongoose, a shiny, chrome bike with hand brakes, from the garage, and we started out toward Ryan’s again.

“Do you think Ryan’s going to be mad at me?” I asked this question feeling more and more hollow, as if my insides were somehow leaking out of me. 

“Well, maybe not,” was the consoling reply, which, I knew, meant, “Yes.”

“I know he is, but it’s dumb what he’s doing.” Michael didn’t respond. I continued.

“What’s he wanna do? Get killed?” Still no response. I looked over at him. He saw me look and obliged me with a shrug. We continued to ride in silence.

It was eating me, though—that silence, the curiosity, the potentiality of the impending wrath of my friend. Even the breeze blew southwesterly as we pedaled north, which made the ride all the less enjoyable. And I didn’t even want to think what my parents would do if they were to find out I’d sneaked out of the house.

A large sycamore stood two houses from Ryan’s, blocking our view of our friend’s house, guarding the lawn. Once we were under it though, an uninhibited view of the March home was free to our bewildered eyes. We instinctively stopped pedaling once we saw the commotion in the Marches’ front yard.
The first thing I saw was the black station wagon bearing some kind of elaborate seal on its front door. “Police,” Michael muttered, and that was when I noticed two squad cars behind the station wagon. We stopped on the sidewalk, under the tree, and stared, straddling our bicycles. I was clutching my handgrips with fingers white and bloodless.

The streetlights had come on at that moment, the time of the day when the sun fades the sky purple, and the moon, a waning gibbous in the opposite sky, was barely visible. We saw Ryan and his mom and dad in the front yard (the whole March family), but Ryan wasn’t standing with them. A lady in a full-length blue coat, with about two inches of gray skirt showing at the bottom, stood next to Ryan. Her coat was unbuttoned, and we could see her white blouse and the gray lapel of her suit jacket underneath her coat. Her hair was short and mostly black, and her face was darkened by the shadows cast by the streetlamps. She was talking to the police officers.

Three officers stood next to Mr. and Mrs. March. Ordinarily, I would have studied their uniforms, sidearms, and actions with awe had it not been for Ryan. He stood with his hands stuffed into his pants pockets, jacket sleeves filling with the night breeze, and head hanging limply. Just then, a fourth officer came out of the house and gestured with a wave to the lady in the blue coat. She bent over just a bit to put her hand on Ryan’s back, since he was only as tall as the sash of her coat, and guided him to the passenger side of the station wagon, opening the door for him and ushering him inside. Then she walked around the car, climbed in behind the wheel, and shut the door. The car pulled slowly away from the curb, driving in the direction from which we’d come, and as it passed us, we watched Ryan put his hands on the window as his eyes focused in on his parents, or house, or both. He probably never saw us in the long, heavy shadow of that old sycamore, straddling our bikes, as he slowly rolled past us. I looked at him for as long
as he was in view and stared at the horizon after he was gone. I didn’t know where he was going, doubted he would be coming back, and didn’t want to see what was about to happen with his parents. Somehow I already knew.

"Come on, Michael. Let’s go home," I whispered hoarsely. We rode back, and, once I was home and safely tucked away under the sheets, the ceiling in my bedroom was darker and the night was longer than they had ever been before.
This Means I Love You

Molly Wills spun me around at recess, grabbed my ear to pull me towards her, and would have planted a kiss right on my mouth except that I managed to instinctively kick her in the ankle, just hard enough to make her lose her grip. Retreating a few steps, I looked at her dull brown hair, flushed red cheeks, and tiny pink lips in horror, having narrowly escaped a devastating blow to my boyish honor.

“You just wait, Jared Keesling,” Molly said, pointing her mitten finger at me, inches from my nose. “I’m gonna make you my boyfriend if you like it or not!” She glared at me through tears brought on by anger, not by physical pain.

“Shhhh. Quiet down. And leave me alone.” I ran away to a safer spot on the playground and found my friends playing freeze-tag. Pretending nothing at all traumatic had just happened twenty-five yards away and only a minute before, I joined in the hollering and dodging that a game of freeze-tag requires. The fourth grade was a time for us boys that still pre-dated the transition of opinion regarding those of the female race, but our awareness had budded enough to make boy-girl coupling interesting—except that we were only interested in haranguing and ridiculing the boy who was sissy enough to have a “girlfriend.”

Thankfully, the first half of the school year was winding down, and Christmas was rapidly approaching. Mrs. Kilkelly probably loved the holiday season as much as any kid. She used to call us her children since, she said, there was no one else for her to be so concerned about. She was always advising us to behave ourselves, to find the right kind of friends, and to do our best in school. To emphasize all of this, she bought every one of her fourth graders a
present, a present intended to be both educational and challenging. In other words, everybody got a book.

That Christmas, on the last school day before break, we all gathered around the Christmas tree to unwrap our presents. I tugged the paper from my present and read the words, “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, by Mark Twain.” I’d heard of Tom Sawyer, and, actually, I was excited to get it. A picture of two boys wearing denim overalls without shirts underneath filled the book’s cover. One boy had tousled red hair, and the other wore a beat up straw hat, while each of them wore the kind of grin that promised hours of fun just inside the table of contents.

Feeling a huge smile stretch across my face, I held the book aloft by the bottom bound corner, looked around, and saw the expressions of all the rest of the boys in the class. Michael Bristow’s eyebrows were raised quizzically as he studied the book in his hands, his lips pursed into the smallest of frowns. David Harper’s eyebrows rose too as he gave Mrs. Kilkelly a polite but weak and unsure half-smile. Nathan Carlson’s head fell limply backward. He stared at the ceiling while his chest filled with a sigh that he then exhaled, his lower lip jutting out in disappointment. From Jason Henderson’s mouth came slow, choppy reading coupled with a conspicuous edge: “The Hardy Boys. The Yellow Feather Mystery. Oh wow, thanks.” He slung the gift straight to the ground, and it hit the floor with a slight clap.

“I’ll trade you,” Michael offered.

“No way.”

I quickly hid my delight with the best scowl I could muster and concealed the book as best I could under my arm. I saw Mrs. Kilkelly look at me, so I gave her a covert smile of thanks, but then tried to blend in with my friends the ingrates.
Secretly, throughout Christmas break, I read the novel. I wasn’t used to reading very much, and I wasn’t used to enjoying reading, but there was nothing Tom could do which I didn’t find thrilling or glorious. His antics at Sunday school, his swindling the neighborhood kids time and again, his escapades with Huckleberry Finn—every bit of it left me daydreaming. I wasn’t a fast reader, but, that Christmas break, there was little else I did. I was hooked.

On the first day of school in January, Mrs. Kilkelly asked us, directly after we’d all pledged our allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, whether or not any of us had made any New Year’s resolutions. None of us had, so our teacher explained what she meant and gave all of us time to think about it.

After a few moments, Mrs. Kilkelly asked her question again. A few girls volunteered their information. One of them was Molly, who said, “I want to make new friends.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, dear,” Mrs. Kilkelly cooed. Molly beamed and then turned around to give me a big smile. “Do any boys want to add to the conversation?” Mrs. Kilkelly asked.

Molly’s big grin made me want to gag. I stuck my tongue out at her and put my finger up my right nostril with a sneer.

“Jared? How about you?”

Startled by the calling of my name, I turned suddenly to face Mrs. Kilkelly, my sneer fading to sheepishness as I withdrew my tongue and finger. “Um, wha...?”

“What is your resolution, Jared?”

I looked around as all eyes turned to me. I saw Nathan and David and Jason, and I swallowed my intended answer about the book. “To be... more... to be... nicer... to people.”
I groped for the vaguest and most off-target thing I could think of and then melted into a slouch, seeking refuge below my desktop.

After a while it was time for recess, which we had indoors that day since it was so cold outside. A few of us boys decided to play a board game, so I volunteered to go to the cabinet and pick one out. At the cabinet, I was met by Molly.

"Hi, Jared."

"Um, I'm getting a game." I stared at my shoelaces.

"I didn't say what my whole resolution was."

I brushed past her without looking at her. "I need a game," was all I could think to say.

"You wanna know what it was?"

"No."

"I want to make new boyfriends."

All of the sudden, the words on the game boxes all blurred together. The heat kicked on in the school building, and I felt sweat on my neck around the Adam's apple.

"Like you. Jared."

The building's heat smelled rancid, like rotten eggs, as it always smelled when it was being turned on for the first time in a long while. My stomach churned. "I think I'm gonna be sick," I said genuinely. Reaching for the first box I could, I grabbed a game and turned to speed away, bumping into my friend Graham in the process.

"Sorry, Graham," I said without looking back. Molly called something after me, but I didn't listen as I hustled to the safety that the "boys' corner" offered.
The other boys were almost unanimously anti-reading, pro-illiteracy, which meant that my New Year's resolution would have been as popular as volunteering for summer school. I had resolved that I would finish Tom Sawyer, a book over 250 pages long, the longest I'd ever picked up. When I stepped off the school bus that day, I let myself into the house, locked the door behind, and went straight to my room. I read all afternoon, ignoring my sisters when they came home with my mother. I was entirely lost in the pages.

Blissfully reading for almost two straight hours brought me to the middle of chapter six—with growing alarm. The cause of my concern was Tom’s infatuation with Becky Thatcher, and the looming consequences of that infatuation. Now I was turning pages with dread. I wanted to stop, but I was unable to divert my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was reading. Tom was getting in trouble just so he could sit by that girl. I started getting light-headed. Tom was writing the "L" word on his slate. I started getting dizzy. The pages seemed to turn of their own accord. Tom was rendezvousing at the schoolhouse to meet the girl--and skipping lunch at that! The whirling in my mind moved down to my throat, lodging there in a big lump. Then they spoke of engagement. The lump began to move threateningly back and forth in my esophagus.

Just after Becky Thatcher said she would marry Tom, I turned the page to the very end of chapter seven and read:

By and by she gave up, and let her hands drop; her face, all glowing with the struggle, came up and submitted. Tom kissed the red lips....

Immediately, I slammed the book shut, threw it to the floor, and stared across my bedroom, directly into the mirror sitting atop my dresser. I had been substituting myself for Tom
Sawyer from page one, but if I were Tom, then Becky Thatcher was . . . No. No, it couldn’t be.
I felt a bead of sweat trickling down my neck. The lump in my throat had crashed with a thud
into the pit of my stomach, and the sulfur-like heating smell from school returned, filling my
nostrils.

“Jared. Time for dinner,” Mom called from the kitchen.

I practically levitated down the stairs in a haze. The next thing I knew, I was sitting at the
kitchen table, staring at a plateful of tuna casserole. A few seconds later, it was still casserole,
but its primary component was no longer tuna.

“Jared!”

“Oh gross!”

“Ooooooooh!”

“Jared, oh!, Jared, are you all right?” I looked around the table at the faces of my
family—my sisters sitting, stunned; my father jumping from his chair, my mother coming to my
seat. Then, my whole head lurched again in a false alarm.

Mom jerked me from my seat at the table and spurred me onward toward the bathroom,
running alongside of me with her hand on my upper back, practically dragging me by the shirt,
while Dad bolted ahead to open the door and lift the toilet seat. My sisters trailed in our wake
and peered around the corner. Dinner wasn’t our only family event that night.

I went to school with lead feet and quivering nerves the next day. Since I hadn’t run a
fever, Mom and Dad sent me to confront head-on the terror of recent weeks. Molly Wills was a
living, breathing, pony-tailed ulcer.
An odd thing happened that day, the cause of which I couldn’t quite grasp, and the timing was even more baffling. I had secretly told Mrs. Kilkelly, a few weeks earlier, that I’d been dedicatedly reading *Tom Sawyer* and thoroughly enjoying it. As we were dividing into reading groups this particular morning, Mrs. Kilkelly came to me and, speaking in a low voice, said, “Jared, I want you to be in the red group from now on. Okay?”

I looked at Mrs. Kilkelly’s smiling face—she was expecting me to return in kind—and felt the blood rush out of my head. “Do I have to?”

“Jared? I thought you’d be excited.”

“I’m not,” I mumbled quietly.

“I know there will be a little extra work, but I think you can handle it, dear.”

All the groups were already assembled in their respective corners, and everyone was already turning pages in their readers. I looked at the blue corner, where Michael Bristow, David Harper, Graham Stanley, and others sat, where I used to sit. Then I glanced all the way across the room to the opposite corner, the red corner, to see its only three members: Adam Corey, Karen Davis, and Molly Wills.

Meekly, I followed Mrs. Kilkelly to the red corner and sat in the chair next to Molly as one of the living dead might. I waited for something horrendous from Molly, but nothing happened. The four of us read aloud, taking turns at every new paragraph, under Mrs. Kilkelly’s supervision for most of the time. When the other three laughed, I only stared at black ink on white paper. When Adam said, “Ah, cool,” I didn’t know why. When it was my turn to read, I might as well have been pronouncing Latin, enunciating without translating. With Molly on my left, I sat on the very edge of the right side of my chair with part of my behind suspended in
space, causing my right leg to grow weary bearing half of the load for which the chair was designed.

But Molly never made a move. Even when Mrs. Kilkelley left to check on the other groups, Molly kept reading and following the words with her finger, seemingly unaffected by my presence. I was gradually more relieved, but couldn’t muster any sort of smile until we got to recess. We begged Mrs. Kilkelley to let us go outside. Each of us had brought mittens or gloves, knit hats, snow boots, and even scarves, and some kids had snow pants as well. Thus prepared and thus unified in our request, Mrs. Kilkelley said we could go out for twenty minutes on the condition that no one would throw snowballs. A snowball could poke out someone’s eye.

All of us boys played in our usual section of the recess yard, building a snow fort and a secret arsenal of snow missiles. While I was collecting the icicles that hung from the window overhangs, which would either be used in ever-failing attempts at barred snow-fort window construction or would be concealed inside of projectiles, I saw Molly approaching this little weird kid who was scurrying back and forth in the shadow that the school cast on the ground. After a moment or two he stopped and they talked for a while. Puzzled, I squinted to see who it was that had earned her attentions.

After recess was over we went inside, and still, Molly Wills refrained from making her advances toward me, so, as we all took our seats, I began to study her, determined to discover the identity of the strange kid at recess. I stared and stared, watching her to see who she was watching and then, finally, I had it--Anthony Lusby! Anthony Lusby? That was the last kid I would have guessed! I was incredulous.
What did she see in Anthony Lusby? Why, there were whole days that could pass by in a wealth of fun, adventure, discovery, during which at not one single time whatsoever would Anthony Lusby ever even enter my mind. We all thought he was weird, and no one ever played with him, but he didn’t seem to care, or even notice. For instance, he spent days’ worth of recesses simply staring at a cocoon fastened to the brick wall of the school. Then, giving no warning at all, one day, in the blink of an eye, he practically ripped off his shoe, grabbed it by the toe, and smashed the cocoon with the heel in a single fell swoop, dancing in circles, not making a sound, hands flying and feet kicking. He was completely random. One instant he could be talking about the distinct tastes of different bugs, and the next, we’d be learning all about his baby brother’s diapers. Most of us simply disregarded him, but I was finding that harder and harder to do. I began to hate Anthony Lusby.

Several days passed as I watched Molly’s attempts to talk to Anthony. He sat across the room in the lowest reading group (yellow), so her only opportunities came during recess. However, Anthony spent most of his recesses flitting about the playground like a butterfly, or a bat. As far as I could tell, he was oblivious to Molly’s affections. When she approached him, he immediately began talking non-stop, but that was only after she had managed to arrest his attention by yanking his coat or shoving him. Sometimes, in the middle of conversations, he would throw himself on the ground and roll around or he would start spinning in circles. If she left, he would keep doing it, and if she stayed, he would eventually stop. To him, she was merely a welcome pair of ears.
To her, he must have been a challenge, and I confronted her one day to find out for sure. We were walking down the sidewalk to board the school buses that were lined up in front of us, when I approached her from behind, and said, “Anthony Lusby’s a geek.”

She jumped at the sound of my voice in her ear, but then responded, “No, he’s not. He’s just strange.”

“I wish he’d jump in the lake.”

“Well, I wish you’d jump in the lake.”

“Well, I wish you’d shut up.”

“Jared,” Molly stopped walking, turned, and faced me, the corner of her upper lip curling, her eyes narrowing, and her nose crinkling. “Jared, I used to think you were nice, but you’re not. At all. If you want me to shut up, then just buzz off; you started it.”

“Well, maybe I will.” My bravado carried me into my bus, but by the time I found a seat, my words, replaying in my mind over and over, faded to a clanging, hollow drone. I looked out the window, ready to show her my tongue should she see me, but she didn’t. Instead, she stepped onto her bus and out of my sight.

The next day was more of the same. The greater my insult of the nebulous Anthony Lusby, the stauncher her defense. I found myself watching her during reading group, during regular class time, during lunch, even during recess. Some indescribable property of Molly Wills had enveloped me in curiosity. At recess, for example, I’d watch her, while playing in games of freeze-tag with the guys, as she would amble nimbly up the jungle gym, then jump down, regain her balance, spit, and then run with the other girls to the slide or the swings or the monkey bars. When we walked in a double file line to and from bathroom break, my gaze would be fixed on
her short, brown pony-tail or pig-tails bobbing in time with her gait, as she walked before me, farther ahead in the line. During class time, I found the way she chewed a pencil to toothpicks more intriguing than the spitwad Jason Henderson and Nathan Carlson were bandying between them while Mrs. Kilkelly’s back was turned. The mystique of Molly Wills became my sole study.

Weeks passed. The drizzle of a late-January night brought about a muddy, snow-melting, late January morning. On such days, we elementary school students played in the parking lot. We boys had caught the third graders playing freeze-tag, our usual game, and, not wanting to look like third graders, we had taken to playing the more mature game of kickball.

The pack of girls in our class observed very nomadic tendencies at recess. They would run here and there doing who knows what. That day, they happened to claim some territory bordering the section of parking lot that served as our outfield, where I stood.

I eventually caught myself, after the second or third time, stealing covert glances at the girls, namely, at Molly. Inning after inning, I would rush to right field, first searching her out, then finding her, then noting what she was doing. That day, they had jump ropes. After a while, the girls grew tired of jumping the ropes and chanting their mindless songs, and one inventor looped her rope around the waist of another girl. Before long, there was an entire train, running, bumping, stumbling, still chanting, distracting. I watched Molly, in the lead, changing directions, her arms stretched out airplane-style, her pony-tail, so long and pretty, swishing right and left like a pendulum. Then she turned the train directly toward our outfield and turned her face squarely in my direction. Her eyes caught mine, and we both froze. The girl behind her bumped into her, and a domino effect rippled all the way down the line. I saw her eyes widen.
and her eyebrows rise. The corners of her mouth lifted suscetibly, while her nubile arms
dropped to her side, and her small, pink lips came together in a--

Blam! Right upside the head, the kickball struck me and sent me staggering.
Immediately the entire fourth grade began to laugh—all the boys, and all the girls. The ball
bounced to Molly’s feet, and I looked around, knowing I had to do something.

Squaring my shoulders and lifting my eyes to look straight ahead, I moved with measured
steps to Molly. The laughing of the rest of the kids was simply a dull background, asynchronous,
as I stood before her.

Molly held the ball up to me with one hand on each side of it, her arms completely
straight. A strange expression arose in her eyes and startled me. It was a honeyed look and a
forgiving one, as if the insult from a few weeks before had never happened. I tried to find the
words to describe the expression on her face, but all I could think was that it was the nicest and
the warmest smile I had ever received, from anyone, and I kind of liked it. While her mouth
smiled, her fingertips trembled against the ball, and I was yanked back to consciousness, to an
awareness of our, of my, surroundings, jolted into action. As I reached for the ball, my own
fingers trembling and mouth quivering, I looked her straight in the eyes, such deep and soft eyes,
and then, let go with the most horrendous belch that I could spontaneously summon, saying,
“THANK YOU,” in the midst of it, unleashing it right in her face. It must have been at least a
couple of seconds long.

“Jared Keesling!” she blurted, recoiling. All the girls exclaimed, “Ooooooh!” and “Oh,
gross!” while every boy playing kickball fell to the ground in paroxysms of laughter. I gave her
a toothy grin. "Jared Keesling!" Molly was crimson. "Ohhhh, I hate you!" She tried to grab my ear to wrench it off, but I scurried away with the ball.

As I turned to rejoin my friends and collect their congratulations, a wave of intoxicating queasiness overwhelmed me. While we boys huddled together, I glanced over my shoulder to see her again, finding her fixed in the same spot. The fire in her eyes kindled the fire in my heart, and while she quivered, livid with rage, despite the consoling efforts of her friends, I soared, smiling from ear to ear, borne up by an exaltation of bliss.
All My Friends

We who sat in the corner of the classroom nearest the door could just barely hear the fat kid bawling inside the principal's office. After I pretended a coughing fit, Mrs. Kilkelley told me I could leave the room to get a drink of water. I walked all the way down the hall and turned the corner before I found Jason Henderson. I could see his black, spiked hair wavy behind the glazed glass of the principal's door.

Just then Jason opened the door, his chunky squirrel face streaked with tear-tracks. As soon as he saw me, he smeared the tracks on his face with a fist. "Don't worry, no one heard," I lied.

"It didn't hurt." Sniff.

"I know."

We walked back to the classroom in silence. After Jason walked into the room, I counted to five and then followed. "All right, class," Mrs. Kilkelley said as she stood at the front of the colorful elementary classroom. Glancing my way, she finished her sentence, "Jared, take your seat because I have an important announcement to make this morning."

I obeyed. All the rest of the kids sat up obediently in their seats, except Jason, of course, who sulked in a slouch, after his paddling.

"Jason, sit up, please." He did. Mrs. Kilkelley spoke in a slow and measured tone. "Now, starting tomorrow, Ryan will be coming back for good."

What? I sat up and leaned forward.

"His foster parents want to let him finish the school year here where all his friends are."
I eventually realized my mouth was gaping wide open when I noticed the jaws of Michael Bristow and Jason had dropped as well. Ryan had visited us for a week at the beginning of March, and three weeks had elapsed since.

“I want all of you to try to treat him just as you did before he left. Don’t ask too many questions; just be nice.”

“I want to punch him in the eye,” Molly Wills, who sat diagonally in front of me, muttered to Karen Davis, the girl who sat behind her and beside me.

“Now, Ryan has been attending another school for the last three months, but he’s pretty much been learning what you have been in the meantime. I will need to spend some extra time helping him with history and science though, so all of you will have to be patient with him.”

Mrs. KilKelly’s eyes examined the room, drifting up and down each row. “All right?”

At the end of the day, I rode home on the bus, let myself into the house, and waited for my parents to come home. About an hour later, they did. I bounded down the stairs and half-skipped into the kitchen where my mother was. “Guess what?”

My mom turned from the counter, where she was opening a can of green beans, and patted me on the head before she turned back to the vegetables. “What, hon?”

“Ryan’s coming back!”

“Back to school? Your school?” Mom said, spilling the green beans into a glass dish.

“Yeah! His new mom and dad want him to be with his friends!”

“Well, I’ll bet you’re pretty excited about that, aren’t you?” Mom smiled at me, walking a few feet over to the microwave.

Dad walked into the kitchen then. “What’s all this?”

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“Ryan’s back!”

Dad patted me on the back with his broad hand. “Well, I’ll bet you feel a lot better, don’t you?”

“Jeff,” Mom scolded, but I interrupted.

“You said it.”

“Honey, have you done your homework yet?” Mom asked. The microwave beeped.

“No.”

“Then go get it out and ready to go, and come back here for dinner.”

“And tell your sisters it’s time to eat,” Dad added.

That night I inhaled my dinner, green beans and all, breezed through my homework, and sent myself straight to bed by around eight o’clock, ignoring Jennifer and Rachel the whole evening so as not to get into any fights with them. I figured that the sooner I got to sleep, the sooner it would be the next day, and the sooner I would see my pal Ryan again.

I leaped off the school bus the next day and ran into the school building, straight to my classroom. Some of my classmates were already there, but not Ryan. By the time the bell rang, officially signifying that it was time to begin learning, we had all taken our seats. A new desk had been added to the front of the row nearest Mrs. Kilkelly’s big desk in the corner of the room, shifting the desks behind it backward one position. It was still empty.

Mrs. Kilkelly wasn’t there either, so none of us bothered ending our conversations, bell or no bell. I looked over to Jason and asked, “Where’s Ryan?”

“Huh?” he said, two rows away.
Michael Bristow, at the front of his row, intercepted, "He should be here. Maybe he's with Mrs. Kil Kelly, wherever she is."

Right then, the door opened. Framed in the entrance stood Ryan March, with Mrs. Kil Kelly just behind, her hand on his shoulder. He surveyed the room with a new caution, his eyes roving over the class. He was wearing a clean, bright white T-shirt, bearing the logo of the Chicago Cubs, and a new pair of blue jeans, completely intact, even at the knees. A bright blue, unweathered winter coat was folded under his arm.

He stood there only for a second at the most before he began moving to his desk, guided by our teacher. I noticed that his hair was plastered to his scalp, and his complexion was surprisingly pale, much whiter than before. His eyes were like the kind I used to draw when I was five—just black dots floating inside white ovals. His mouth turned down and almost sagged off his face.

"Hi, Ryan!" I called instinctively, but my words hung in the air, echoing, and stinging my ears.

He turned and looked in my direction, but his eyes went passed me, and I didn't know if he actually saw anything. "Hey," he muttered as he continued toward his desk.

Mrs. Kil Kelly stood at the front of the room. It was business a usual; we all rose from our chairs, as directed, and pledged allegiance, but, even though our shoulders were square to the flag, we all stared, with right hands over hearts, at Ryan. After the recitation, we sat down.

Jason took his seat, reached into his desk, withdrawing a folded sheet of lined paper, and raised his hand.
"One moment, Jason," Mrs. Kilkelly started. "Now class, I was going to be discreet about all of this, but I noticed how you weren’t pledging the flag but pledging allegiance to Ryan instead."

We laughed at the joke. Mrs. Kilkelly’s smile faded when Jason thrust his hand into the air again and cleared his throat for attention. “Just a minute, please, Jason,” she said with a strained voice. “Now, everyone,” her smile was back, “turn to Ryan and say, ‘Hi, Ryan.’”

“Hi, Ryan.”

“Now say, ‘Welcome back, Ryan.’”

“Welcome back, Ryan.”

“Now say, ‘You can do my homework, Ryan.’”

“You can do my homework, Ryan.”

We laughed again as we returned our attention to Mrs. Kilkelly. Her joke had worked; she’d helped us get the curiosity out of our systems and still had maintained order in her classroom. But Ryan continued to stare stonily at the blackboard despite the ripples of giggles that lingered in the wake of Mrs. Kilkelly’s humor. Jason began to wave when Mrs. Kilkelly continued, “Now, I was just teasing. You should all do your own homework, of course.” Then her resurrected smile died again. “Yes, Jason?”

“My mom wrote you a note.”

Mrs. Kilkelly walked to Jason’s desk, and Jason shoved the letter into her face. “Thank you,” she said before taking the letter. She unfolded the paper, her eyes roamed back and forth across the few lines, and without looking up, she muttered, “Thank you,” for the second time before dropping the letter on her desk.
After lunch, the four of us--Michael, Jason, Ryan, and I--stood in the recess yard kicking at lingering piles of slush. “What did the letter say?” Michael asked Jason.

“They said if I got spanked at school again, they’d sue.”

“No way.”

“Yep. Something like that anyway.”

“Jason got spanked yesterday morning by Mrs. Peroni,” I explained to Ryan.

“Oh.”

Michael studied Jason for a brief second, his head cocked to the right. “They’ll sue?”

“Uh huh.”

“What about all the other times you were spanked?”

“That was the first time.”

Even Ryan was startled. He came out of his reverie to say, “Mrs. Dobrowsky spanked you last year. Three times.”

“Hah, three times in the third grade.” Michael liked the word play.

“No, she didn’t.” Jason scooped up a pile of slush with his bare hand and started shaping it.

“Then what happened those times?” Ryan walked up to Jason, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

“Mrs. Dobrowsky just talked to me. And the third time was by Mr. Ferguson, not Mrs. Dobrowsky. And he just slapped a mat in his office real loud and told me to yell. He said if I did anything bad, he’d tell Mrs. Peroni.”
“No way,” we three muttered at the same time, but we believed. So the rumor about the gym teacher’s method of discipline was true, all scare tactic and blackmail. That old softie! “So Mrs. Peroni is the only one that spanks?”

“Yep, and that was the first time I ever been spanked, too,” Jason fired his slush ball at the school building, and it exploded against the wall, spreading out in streaks of brown and gray that soon disappeared, “in my whole life.”


“Wow, your parents must love you,” I mused.

“No, they hate me.” Jason’s perceptiveness was pretty dull, I knew, but this claim of being hated was a surprise. He never got spanked; he never got in trouble (at home); he never had to do any chores. If he weren’t loved, I didn’t know who was.

Ryan kicked some slush at Jason. “Jason, shut up.”

“Jason Henderson!” Startled, we turned to discover Mrs. Kilkelly, bundled in a long brown coat, pink ear muffs on her head, small brown boots on her feet, standing right behind us.

“Jason, what’s the rule about throwing snowballs?”

“Huh?”

“What’s the rule about throwing snowballs?” she demanded.

“Don’t do it,” he answered, staring straight at her.

“And did you just throw one?”

“No.”

She crossed her arms and drove her glance into his eyes. “What did I just see you do then?” Michael and I started backing away.
“I didn’t throw any snowball.”

‘Why, that’s a bald-faced lie! Young man, I just saw you throw one. Right at the school building,” she argued, gesturing with an extended arm and pointed finger at the wall.

“No, that was a slushball.”

Mrs. Kilkelly’s eyes grew really wide as she pointed at the door, some twenty yards away.

“You just march yourself right into the classroom. Now.”

I’d never tried dodging from a teacher through such foolish loopholes, and I had never seen anyone else try it either, but my own attempts at home with my parents had taught me well. Mrs. Kilkelly’s face was red, and her eyes were big and round, just as I’d expected her reaction would be. Jason kicked some slush, shoved his hands into his pockets and began to move toward the door. Mrs. Kilkelly watched him for a few moments and then started after him. Without turning around she said, “Boys, come along.”

We exchanged glances and then followed, silently. The shrill whistle Mrs. Kilkelly blew brought the rest of the class to the sidewalk near the school building, where we lined up behind her before marching double file, girls in front and boys in back, back to our classroom.

When we got into the room, Karen Davis noticed the clock and said, “But, Mrs. Kilkelly, we still have twenty minutes, don’t we?”

“Yes, Karen,” Mrs. Kilkelly replied as she took her coat off and hung it on the coat rack. “Somebody was misbehaving so we all have to come in in order for me to keep an eye on him.”

Jason had already stripped off his cold-weather gear and was sitting at this desk. “Now, children,” Mrs. Kilkelly announced, “Go ahead and play for the rest of the recess time.”
Everybody began pulling games out of the cabinet, and some of the other boys set up a
Nerf basketball hoop over the chalkboard. Mrs. Kilkelly went to Jason and whispered
something. He gave her a look that would have gotten me spanked at home and then dropped his
head on his folded arms resting on his desk.

Ryan, Michael, and I knew better than to go over to him, so we sat in a corner of the room
near the door and began to talk. Coming inside was unfair, we thought, since the rest of the
school was outside on the recess yard.

An awkward silence reigned in our little corner of the room, so I tried to break it. “So,
um, what’s been goin’ on, Ryan?” I asked.

“Nothin’.” He was folding a sheet of paper into an airplane, only half-interested in it.

“Oh.” The three of us just sat there, mostly staring at the floor. Michael half-heartedly
played with a little rubber baseball, bouncing it from the floor to the wall to himself. I fidgeted
with a pencil.

After a horribly long minute, Mrs. Kilkelly interrupted our awkward conversation from
her desk across the room. “Class, I have to take this note down to Mrs. Peroni’s office.” She
waved the note above her head. “I don’t want anyone leaving this room. Karen?” Karen Davis
sat up straighter and turned her head, surrounded by a few other girls playing a board game. “I’m
going to make you the monitor. Boys and girls, if anyone misbehaves, Karen will tell me. All
right, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now, I’ll be back in just a few minutes.” As Mrs. Kilkelly walked toward the
doors, she passed Jason’s desk. Drumming her fingers on it twice, she muttered, “And you stay
put, young man.” Behind her back, Jason mouthed her words mockingly, wagging his head back and forth. Mrs. Kilkelley walked out the door, closing it behind her.

As soon as it clicked shut, Jason bolted out of his desk and ran over to us.

“Jason,” Karen called, a little timidly.

“Shut up, Karen.” He plopped down beside me.

Molly Wills jumped to her feet from her spot next to Karen. “Jason Henderson, we’re gonna tell.”

“Yeah? Shut up, Molly.” Molly sat down in a huff, and the circle of girls leaned inward, whispering. Jason had a precious few minutes before Mrs. Kilkelley would return so, with Michael posted at the window in the door, Jason wasted no time. “So, Ryan, do you hate your new parents?”

Ryan wadded up his paper airplane and threw it at the trash can. It missed, and he left it on the floor. “Yeah, I hate ‘em.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“Because all they ever talk about is church.”

“Church?” Jason echoed. “That’s for wimps.”


“Why?” I repeated.
Ryan frowned at me, a little annoyed, and then continued. “Because they’re jerks. Back with my *real* mom and dad, I didn’t have no stupid brothers and sisters. And I didn’t have to do homework. And I could do whatever I wanted.”

“You could?” This sounded like utopia to me.

“Yeah. Dad was always passed out on the couch, and Mom was never around. The only time I had to watch out was when they were both home.”

Jason’s eyes lit up. “What happened then?”

“They fought. They hit each other. And threw stuff and broke stuff. And the first peep out of me was . . . .” He paused. His fingers were wrapped tightly around the little rubber ball which he began to pound against the floor.

Michael and Jason and I had inhaled Ryan’s every word, but now, all of a sudden, it all clicked inside my head. I remembered those fights with the sixth graders that Ryan had always been getting into, or so he’d said. And I remembered the bruises he’d always covered up. And I remembered the look on my dad’s face the night we’d talked about Ryan, and how Michael and I had bicycled to Ryan’s house, and the tall lady in the blue coat was taking him in her car while the police were there. Now, finally, three months later, in one instant, it all made sense. “They hit you. Right?” I whispered, leaning forward, eyebrows raised, waiting for him to tell me I was wrong.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“They did?” Jason was amazed. Then, turning to me, he said, “Hey, how did you know?”
Michael turned from the window and answered over his shoulder, "Because we came over that night on our bikes, and we saw the police, Ryan. And the lady."

Ryan’s upper lip jutted out and quivered as his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. He squared his shoulders back and asked, "You saw that?"

"Uh huh."

"But, but why did you come over that night?"

I took this one. "Because we had to meet with our parents and Mrs. Peroni about all the fights and trouble we were getting into because of you and those sixth graders."

"Yeah, I remember that," Jason chimed.

No one looked at Jason as I continued. "But you never fought any sixth graders, did you?"

After a moment Ryan said, "No," and hung his head.

Michael peered out the window down the hall, but Mrs. Kilkelly was still around the corner at the principal’s office, so I kept talking. "Yeah, and I was pretty scared about all of that. So was Michael, I think--""""Yep."

"--so that night I had to talk about it. But my dad said--"

"You, you told your dad?" Ryan interrupted as he jumped to his feet.

"Just about your bruises and stuff."

"So it was your dad who called the police?!!"

"No... no, I don’t think he did."
Jason stood up then and practically shouted, “Your dad told the police to put the Marches in jail?”

“Yeah, and stuck me in a rotten FOSTER home?” Ryan accused, his voice cracking a little.

The whole class turned and looked at us. I was confused. Everything whirled around in my head, flushing the former moment of clarity away, and Ryan’s angry red face and Jason’s big fat face, both staring so hard at me, stole all the words from my brain. “No, I . . . no, he didn’t . . . he didn’t say . . . do . . . that.”

“So it’s all your fault!” Jason bellowed.

“No, it’s . . . I don’t know. No--”

“Guys,” Michael called. “She’s coming. She’s coming!”

Jason didn’t hear him. “So, because of you, Jared, Ryan lost his mom and dad!”

“No!” I wanted to explain that I had only talked to my father out of concern for my friend, but even I wasn’t entirely certain that I was justified.

Karen and Molly ran over to us, and Molly commanded, “Stop yelling, right now!”

Jason snarled at her and said, “Shut up,” and then turned to me. “Jared, you stupid little idiot!”

I looked at Jason, then at Ryan, who was sitting on the floor again, staring at the wall, then at Michael, who kept repeating, “Guys, she’s coming!,” then at the rest of the class and at Karen and Molly. My cheeks burned and my hands felt wet, so I began wiping them nervously on my jeans as Jason kept talking right in my face. “You stupid idiot!”
Molly put her hand on Jason's shoulder and pushed, spinning him to face her, and, on tiptoes, demanded, "Don't you talk to Jared that way, you ugly fat jerk!"

The corner of Jason's mouth curled as he put his hand right on her face and shoved. Molly fell directly to the floor, landing hard on her behind.

"JASON HENDERSON!" Mrs. Kilkelly thundered in the open doorway.

Molly looked up from the floor, her lips quivering as she tried not to cry, her tailbone probably telling her otherwise. Michael cowered in the corner, attempting to disappear in the space between the wall and the open door. I stood as erect as possible, my back and sweaty hands flat against the wall. Ryan sat cross-legged at my feet, not moving at all, appearing not to notice Mrs. Kilkelly. Jason looked straight up at her, his eyes and mouth locked in a matter-of-fact glare.

After that briefest of moments, though it seemed an eternity, Mrs. Kilkelly took one step and grasped Jason by the ear. "I've just about had enough out of you. Apologize to Molly right now!"

At Jason's hesitation, she twisted his ear about a quarter turn. "Oww!" he howled, then, "Sorry," he spat.

"Now, you follow me." She paused before saying, "Note or no note, it's time for you to get a little bit of discipline! If you ever got it at home, just a little, maybe you wouldn't misbehave so miserably in my classroom!" And with that, she hauled him right out into the hallway and lit into him with her bare hand.

The rest of the class, as if on cue, dropped everything--every ball, every UNO card, every game piece--and slinked to our seats with our fastest, stealthiest strides, even Ryan. We all sat
down as quickly and quietly as we could, folded our hands on top of our desks, and stared at the chalkboard. After just a short amount of time, Jason’s howling subsided; then his whimpering and sniveling drifted farther and farther away. I wondered if she were taking him to Mrs. Peroni’s office down the hall. He had it coming, I thought, feeling pity for Molly Wills.

When Mrs. Kilkelly reappeared in the doorway, without Jason, we all snapped our heads back to facing the chalkboard. I don’t know what happened next; I can’t remember any of the rest of day. The next day, though, Jason returned to class with a smirk on his face. He’d told his parents, I knew instantly. Mrs. Kilkelly ignored him mostly, and he ignored her as much as he could without getting into any more trouble. For me, the day was horrible. Ryan, Jason, and Michael brushed me off at recess and refused to notice me at lunch. Though I apologized all the way to the dismissal bell, it did me no good. I was a traitor.

On the following day, we all took our seats, most of us still a little uneasy, or at least mystified, by the recent events swirling around us, only subconsciously anticipating more to come, like a lingering nagging feeling in our consciences, at least in mine. Just as the bell rang that morning, Mrs. Peroni entered our classroom, a younger lady following behind her.

“Boys and girls,” Mrs. Peroni started, using her P.A. announcement voice, “this is Mrs. Dyer--”

“Dwyer--”

“Mrs. Dwyer. Yes, thank you. She will be your substitute teacher. Mrs. Kilkelly will be unable to come to school for a little while.”

At the mention of Mrs. Kilkelly, Jason sat up straight and craned his neck to look around the room. Catching Michael’s eye only earned him a grimace in return. Jason gave him a smug
grin, but Michael turned around, never changing his blank, deadpan expression. Then Jason caught my eye and snarled. I raised my eyebrows in question; Jason shoved his finger up his nose in reply. Finally, he looked at Ryan, who stared back for several seconds until Jason’s smile withered and died, and then Ryan buried his head in his arms, which were folded across his desktop, with only the back of his head, covered by plastered-down hair, still visible.

At Mrs. Peroni’s cue, the class droned on command, “Good morning, Mrs. Dwyer,” but since no one was congratulating him, Jason shrank into an even deeper slouch, his shattered half-grin resting limply on his face. I tried to look into his head, wondering what he had told his parents--probably all lies, I thought--and what he had told himself. Michael and Ryan hated me now, and Mrs. Kilkelley was gone for an indefinite amount of time, all because of him. Jason squirmed in his chair, gazing at the floor, his fat hands clasping the hem of his untucked shirt.

As Mrs. Dwyer began her first attempt to learn our names, I knew I was not the loneliest kid in the class.
April is torturous for a schoolboy in central Indiana. Cold rain drives away the lingering slush of March only to replace it with a sticky mire that disallows any serious mobility on the kickball field at recess. Just after spring break, during the long stretch before school dismissed for the summer, when the sun and clouds fight for control of the sky, when teachers rush to get caught up, when a field trip to a farm to see the animals was more repulsive than exciting anymore, every day was like the twentieth mile of a marathon. It seemed as though I would be shaving before I would be playing outside again.

Sitting in the backseat of the family car, I stared out the window watching the dreary landscape scroll by while Dad drove Mom and me to my elementary school to attend some kind of meeting or other. Raindrops were splattering into view at a regular rate, and I spent the time in the car watching them run down the window, some forming little tributaries and others mighty rivulets, concealing the fact that I wasn’t wearing my seatbelt. All I knew about the meeting to which we were headed was that the issue regarding Mrs. Kilkelly was going to be discussed and finally “fixed,” I hoped.

When we got to my school, I yanked off the ugly, baby blue sock hat with the bouncy, multi-colored yarn ball on top that announced, “Attention, here comes a geek!” and handed it to my mother.

“Oh, Jared, carry your own hat. It’s not that bad,” she said, handing it back to me. “If you’re not careful, I’m going to pick you up and kiss you right on the forehead in front of all these people.” I held on to my hat.
The elementary school library had a very large open space, usually filled with large wooden tables and cumbersome wooden chairs that were difficult to move. In another section of that space were the first through third grade tables and chairs, smaller and wimpier; however, today, I found all of the regular library furniture stacked in the hallway as we entered the library. In their place, rows and rows of odd metal chairs, several people milling among them or already seated in them, were arranged with an aisle bisecting the rows. Together with my mom, dad, and sisters, we walked toward the middle of the rows and took a seat right behind Ryan March and his foster parents.

"Jared, sit by me, okay?" my dad directed. I complied and took the chair between him and Mom, directly behind Ryan. I tapped my friend on the shoulder and whispered a quick, "Hey," afraid to speak out loud in the library.

Ryan turned around and responded, "Um, hey." He looked up at his foster mom, sitting next to him, and she smiled. His eyes came back to me, and he asked, "Is Jason here yet?"

I was surprised that Ryan hadn't turned away from me, so the fact that he actually asked me a question startled me, and I felt my face reveal as much. I shrugged. "Don't think so."

Ryan looked to his mom again, who nodded imperceptibly and smiled again. "Jared," I could tell he didn't exactly know what he wanted to say. "Um, my mom and dad, my new ones, they told me what happened when, you know." I nodded. I knew. He continued, "Anyway, I'm sorry about all the stuff at school."

I just sat there dumbly. My mother, who had been listening, accepted the apology for me by reaching her hand between Ryan and myself. "Hi, I'm Jared's mother, Debbie Keesling."
"It's nice to meet you," Jared's foster mom replied, shaking my mom's hand. "I'm Donna Grafton. This is my husband, Mike." After all the introductions and hand-shakings, my parents and Ryan's talked about boring stuff. Ryan and I listened for awhile, but, luckily, we were short enough to carry on our own conversation, the words of our mothers' discourse traveling above us.

"You're not mad at me?" I asked.

"No, are you mad at me?"

"No way." I felt the grin stretch across my face, and I watched Ryan's do the same.

Ryan looked at me straighforwardly, and his smile straightened out for just a moment. "It was wrong for me to be mad at you. It was sin."

"What do you mean?"

"Jared, I want to tell you about church." He stopped and fidgeted with a string of his coat before continuing. "Well, it's not just church. I want to tell you about Jesus. Jared, yesterday, I got saved."

I had never really heard much about Jesus. Sometimes I heard someone talk about Him, at the store or on TV, but my parents never mentioned Him, so I had never concerned myself with Him too much. I was about to ask Ryan what he meant by getting saved, and what Jesus had to do with it, but out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a small disturbance across the aisle.

"Hey, I think I see Jason right over there," I said, pointing to Jason, who sat across the aisle from us, to our right, and just a couple of rows farther back. My mother, without halting her conversation, put her hand on mine, gently pressed it down to my lap, and kept right on talking.
Ryan had trouble spotting him at first since the library was quickly filling up, but when Jason’s voice rose above the rippling murmur of the crowd, Ryan located him quickly.

“Awww, why not?” Jason whined.

“Jason, shoosh,” his mom said, or, at least, we read from her lips. Jason was tugged into the chair next to her and got a quick finger-in-the-face, “We’re-in-public” scolding. As he crossed his arms over his chest and slumped in his seat, we laughed.

I was getting ready to make a comment about Jason when our view of him was blocked. We looked up and saw two adults, a man and a woman, somebody’s parents, enter Ryan’s row from the center aisle. As they did so, Ryan’s mom turned and called, “Oh, hi!”

“Hi, Donna,” said the lady. “May we sit here?” indicating the open seats next to Ryan.

“Of course.”

“Ryan, may we sit by you?”

“Okay.”

As the lady seated herself next to Ryan, and the man next to her, Ryan’s mom quickly made all the introductions: my parents, Greg and Diane Stanley; Greg and Diane Stanley, my parents. Then it was our turn. After hearing our names, Mrs. Stanley smiled at us. “Well, it’s nice to meet you two young men. Graham was so insistent that you get his bike, Jared. Have you gotten to ride it much?”

“Um, yes, ma’am.”

I had never met Graham’s parents, but they were so unlike their son when I had known him. Mr. Stanley was big and had bright red hair, with freckles all over his skin. Mrs. Stanley
was tall too, even in her chair, and her dark black hair reached down to the middle of her back. When she smiled at me, it was impossible not to smile back.

My mom added, “Oh, now I remember you. I thought you looked familiar. You and your husband brought the bicycle over a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, and I think you and your daughters were home, but not the men,” Mrs. Stanley verified. “I’m glad you like the bike, Jared.”

Mr. Stanley spoke up next. “We’ve heard quite a bit about you, too, Ryan.” Ryan’s face flushed. “I guess you’re a pretty good kickball player and joke-teller. We’re so glad to have seen you around church lately. Graham used to pray for you every night before he went to bed.”

My dad leaned forward since he was a few chairs away from them and said, “Greg and Diane, thank you very much for the bike.” He paused before adding, “We’re so sorry for your loss.”

They both nodded, and no one seemed to know what to say next. Then, Mr. Stanley reached for his wife’s hand and held it in her lap. She looked at him and gave him a smile located mostly in her eyes, while only the corners of her mouth turned upward, and her eyebrows rose ever so slightly. I watched his red hand turn white and thought of Graham who had been so perpetually pale, as if he had only been the slightest wisp of a boy, a vapor ready to drift away. I had never done so before, but I tried to imagine my ghosty friend pedaling that bright blue bicycle. It was hard to see his feet on those pedals going round and round, down the sidewalk, and as I sat back in my chair thinking about it, I lost track of whatever happened next and whatever words followed.
On his last day at school, Graham had fallen down at recess and every one blamed him for making us lose the kickball game. It was true; I had ridden his bicycle since then, surprised that he would give it to me, surprised that his parents would give it up at all. Every time I had ridden it though, the seat and handlebars had burned me. How it shined! How could Graham have ridden a bicycle anyway? He was so frail that one good spill would have killed him. My brain tried to erase that thought, regretting it even as it had formed in my mind. Although I couldn’t imagine him mounted atop it, every time I climbed up on it, I remembered everything else about him. Snow-white boy, bold blue bike--like the clouds and sky of the summer days I was awaiting.

When the ripples of conversation finally ceased, the silence was startling and jolted me into paying attention. I found that Mrs. Kilkelly had entered the room from a side door and was walking across the stage; everyone turned away from their friends and family to face straight ahead. Mrs. Kilkelly was followed by Mrs. Peroni and five other people, who all took their seats behind the table on stage. I recognized one of them, the father of Michael Bristow, one of my best friends. But Mr. Bristow wasn’t smiling as I was used to seeing him.

The five people, including Mr. Bristow, sat behind a table up on stage, and Mrs. Kilkelly sat down next to them, also behind the table, but at the very end of it. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed her until I actually saw her there. Mostly, her face was very sad, but I couldn’t exactly say why. She didn’t frown, but her mouth was set straight with her lips pressed close together. She set her hands on the table, palms down, flat, not fidgety at all. Her hair was pulled up into a bun, which I never found to be a very becoming style on anyone, and I thought there was more gray than that one small, streaked lock on the side, but I was probably wrong. Her
eyes, though, struck me as both attracting and repelling at the same time. They were so odd that I had to analyze them, so I looked again: Same color, shape, etc. but no direction, pointless--they might as well have been closed. I looked at them and then looked away a couple of times, finding them strangely unnerving.

The woman in the middle seat at the table cleared her voice and began, "Thank you, folks, for coming out tonight and showing your concern for the community and for our school. Due to the unfortunate incident of a few weeks ago and its impact on these proceedings, we introduce the motion that all regular administrative concerns of the school board be discussed next week, as we feel that most of you are here just for the discussion regarding Mrs. Kilkelly. Do we have a second?"

"Here," somebody said across the aisle.

"All right. All in favor?"

All the adults said, "Aye."

"All opposed, by like sign?"

I waited for something, but this time, no one said anything. I was more than a little confused, but when Ryan turned around and winked at me, I pretended I knew what was going on with what I hoped would be construed as a knowing grin. Then he shrugged and smiled, and, relieved, I reciprocated.

"Now then, I guess it's time to dispel any rumors that are floating around. Darla Peroni, our principal, will recount briefly the very basic facts." Then she turned to our principal with the faintest of smiles and said, "Mrs. Peroni?"
“Yes, thank you. On the morning of Tuesday, the fifth of this month, Mrs. Kilkelly received a note from the Hendersons that reads,” and she picked up a piece of paper from the table, “‘Mrs. Kilkelly, please do not paddle Jason at school anymore. We would prefer I be called at work.’ Signed, ‘Carla Henderson.’

“I don’t want to narrate what Mrs. Kilkelly found when she returned to her room after bringing this note to my office, but, whatever it was, as a result of it, she took Jason Henderson out to the hallway and administered a paddling.

“I heard Jason from my office down the hallway and stepped out to see what was happening. Mrs. Kilkelly was bringing Jason down the hall toward me, told me she had paddled him, and suggested I call the Hendersons. Of course, I did, and I decided it would be best to replace Mrs. Kilkelly with a substitute the next day and until this event has been resolved.” She stopped, then added, as if spontaneously, “Hopefully, that will be tonight.” Then she turned the microphone back to the lady in the middle of the table.

I leaned forward to whisper a question in Ryan’s ear, wondering whether he’d known the latter part of the story or not, but my mom put a hand on my chest and gently pushed me back in my seat, giving the quick, eyes-closed, not-right-now, slight head shake. “All right,” I whispered softly. Then I looked over to find Jason. He was sleeping, his chin nestled into his chunky chest, arms dangling at his sides. Risking the “Don’t-make-me-tell-you-again” glare from Mom, I gradually slid down in my seat, kicked Ryan’s chair, and gestured toward Jason with my head. While Ryan was looking at Jason, Mom’s eloquent eyes said, “Don’t make me tell you again.” Ryan turned around, smirked, turned back. Ryan’s foster mom gave him the eyes-closed, head-shake first warning. “Okay,” I heard him whisper.
The lady at the middle of the table started speaking again. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the issue with which we find ourselves confronted: The Hendersons have graciously decided not to press charges against Mrs. Kilkelley or the school but submit that she should be permanently removed from Griffin Elementary in all capacities. That is why we are forced to deal with this publicly, despite whatever embarrassment it may cause to the parties concerned. Now then, we, the school board, would like to ask the Hendersons to state their opinion for the record."

Everyone turned to look at the Hendersons at that point. In a matter of moments, Jason's mom had elbowed her husband, who very slightly shook his head in response and looked down at his lap. Realizing all eyes were on them, she then stood to her feet and began slowly at first, "We don't want to be the bad guys in this whole affair, but we have doubts about Mrs. Kilkelley. If she is unable to control her temper and spanks a child right after she receives a note from that child's parents that says he is not to be spanked--Well, we feel that to be unprofessional--" A hushed whispering rose from all over the audience, but she continued through it without stopping, "--and I wonder if it is not--" The murmuring grew louder. "--also dangerous to our children as well." At the word "dangerous," all the whispers turned to full-volume voices. My dad said, "Dangerous?!" kind of loud, and my mom just shook her head. With everyone talking, it was hard to hear Mrs. Henderson finish, but she did and then sat down.

One man stood up immediately--I thought it was Courtney Dobrowsky's dad, but I wasn't sure--and asked, "Wait a minute. Doesn't Mrs. Kilkelley have tenure?"

Mrs. Peroni answered, "Yes, she does, but she does not want to stay at Griffin if the Griffin parents do not support her."
Another lady stood up from our side of the aisle but way up front and said with a shaky, quiet voice, “I don’t know about ‘not supporting’ her, but I do think it is a bit alarming that she lost her temper, and maybe we should discuss that?”

More commotion. Another man stood up and said, “Yes, I agree that this is disturbing. If a teacher can’t follow the directions of a parent regarding physical punishment-- Well, I just don’t like the sound of that.”

Again, more commotion. My dad was muttering the whole time to my mom, saying, “I can’t believe this. I don’t believe these people...” When the man sat down, my father stood up fast. Someone else in front of him stood too, but Dad started talking first, so the other person sat down. “Listen to yourselves,” my father began. “This is ridiculous the way conclusions are being drawn about danger and Mrs. Kilkelly’s temper. First, I want to know if anyone, anyone, has ever heard of anything before that remotely resembles this concerning Mrs. Kilkelly. And secondly, I want to know what the Henderson boy did to invoke a paddling.”

He sat down. Some people said, “Yeah,” and, “Yes,” and the murmuring slowly softened. I guess everyone wanted to know what Jason had done. After a few seconds without a response, a lady across the aisle and a little farther back from us stood. I noticed Molly Wills was sitting next to her, but I had never seen Mrs. Wills before. “My daughter, Molly,” (Yep, I was right, I thought) “came home that day and told me what had happened. She said that she and Karen Davis had been put in charge to monitor the classroom while her teacher, Mrs. Kilkelly, stepped out of the room. During that time, Jason Henderson began yelling at Molly’s friend, Jared-- Honey, what’s Jared’s last name?”
“Keesling,” Molly replied. Then she turned to me, still sitting, and waved, her hand remaining timidly close to her body just below her head, only her fingers moving, up and down. Some people saw it and laughed, and I sank down in my chair, feeling my face turn crimson.

Molly’s mom continued. “He began yelling at Jared Keesling, so Molly and Karen asked him to quiet down. He called her a name and then knocked her to the ground. That was when Mrs. Kilkelly entered, and--personally?--I say she can spank every child that behaves in that sort of awful way.”

Mrs. Peroni was the next to respond, although the general noise level had risen due to Mrs. Wills’ editorial opinion. “Ladies and gentlemen, I think it only right to hear the other side of this matter as well. Mrs. Henderson would you like to respond, or was that pretty accurate?”

Jason’s mom got up slowly, and her blush deepened more and more as she spoke her next few sentences. “Jason said Molly had called him names, but he never mentioned Jared.” Then, quietly, “And we were unaware that Jason shoved Molly down.” Then she sat down quickly.

Up on the podium, Mrs. Peroni turned to Mrs. Kilkelly and asked, “And, Mrs. Kilkelly, is that what you saw? Jason pushing Molly to the ground?”

“Th--ahem--that’s correct.” That was the first time I’d heard my teacher’s voice that night, which sounded strangely different from what I was used to hearing. It was kind of hoarse, and she’d stuttered to clear her voice enough to be audible, since it hadn’t been used for awhile.

Mrs. Peroni spoke again, “Well, of course, this kind of behavior should not be tolerated in the classroom, but--” She stopped, then decided about something, her face a hazy mirror of her mind. “Mr. Keesling asked a good question. This issue of temper ought to be either established
or refuted. Has anyone ever seen or heard anything about Mrs. Kilkelly that has indicated rashness or an inability to control her temper?"

There was, at first, a hush, although not an absolutely complete silence, which lasted for many seconds. We all waited for someone to stand, but I knew no one would. Sometimes we complained about school, about homework, even about our teacher, but here was a chance to say whatever we wanted and none of us kids had anything to say, and our parents knew it.

No one stood, and eventually that hush grew louder and louder. I looked up at Mrs. Kilkelly to see if she were happy, relieved, but she just sat there. For the first time I saw her as old. Our teacher had never put a hand on us except in gentle guidance, whether we were at the chalkboard displaying various ranges of understanding, or if, I was forced to admit, we were bent over touching our ankles, with her fingertips poised on our backs as her other hand swung a paddle. I saw paddling then as disciplinary and, while I was too young to appreciate it, I finally realized I needed to accept it as much as I expected grown-ups to accept my mischief--a startling revelation. I blinked once or twice rather forcefully, as if I could repel this invading thought from my awareness. I was used to Mrs. Kilkelly's smile making her cheeks and her eyes soft, but today they were hardened in a stoic look, and she seemed old. I quickly tried to brush away the realization about paddlings, not wanting to admit this truth about them, but Mrs. Kilkelly couldn't look--I didn't know--young? normal? even, safe?, until I admitted the truth in my own mind. I sat in my seat, gnawing my bottom lip while chewing that problem in my consciousness; around me, the room was growing loud.

Finally, Mrs. Henderson stood up. Actually, it was a reluctant bolting up, as if it were hard to get started, but once she began, she shot into the air, and immediately, before completely
standing, she started talking. "I think that this is going entirely too far. I expressly asked that my child would not be struck at school, and immediately this woman strikes him." Everyone stopped talking. Mrs. Henderson’s eyes danced around for a second while her brain processed her next thought, then, "I don’t care if none of you has ever heard of it before--I’m telling you now. This woman [she pointed] struck my son!" Of course, everyone had something to say to that, to their spouses or neighbors. “Now, I’m telling you, I’m really upset here. Some of you may be making disparaging comments about my son. In fact, it’s been done tonight. And some of you, no doubt, make comments about how we have chosen to raise him, but, frankly--” And then I had no question about the source of much of Jason’s vocabulary and why he had fewer inhibitions that I.

Her husband half stood and put his hand on her arm. “Cheryl...,” he said.

She kept going though. “Let me ask you. Is it wrong for someone to hit your child when you explicitly ask them not to?” She paused. “Well, is it?” She paused again. “Maybe you think I’m some kind of crazy lady--I’m not stupid.” Her voice crescendoed. "But I get crazy when old women hit my son! And I don’t want to hear anything about disciplining or parenting skills from someone like her. With what’s going on with her own son, she better keep her hands off mine!"

“What in the world?” I thought. I looked up at my parents. Make her stop, I thought. Mrs. Kilkelly doesn’t have a son. What is she talking about? How could someone be talking about a teacher like that? How could--? how--? I didn’t even know what to think except,

“How?” I turned to my mom, who didn’t look down. I turned to my dad and tugged his sleeve.
“Shhh, Jared. Not now,” he answered in a strange, rough whisper not his own. I started biting a fingernail and rocking in my chair as Mrs. Henderson continued.

“She thinks she’s so wise, but her home is a wreck.” She was spitting words now. “And she keeps trying to meddle in the affairs of others.”

No. No. Stop.

Jason’s mom snapped her fingers. “For instance, the Marches. Why, thanks to her, their household was broken up.”

What? No.

“I guess she thought it would be prudent to ship his parents off to join her own son—*in prison*.”

No. Stop, please.

“And now poor little Ryan’s life—”

Oh, please stop, please.

“is a wreck—”

No, oh please, no, please.

“just like hers.”

“Nooooooooo!” That was Ryan, not me. He leapt to his feet, but, since he was so short, he was barely visible above the heads of the seated adults surrounding him. He swung his shoulders quickly from left to right, turning at the waist, his torso a diminutive helix, while with his eyes he hastily surveyed the crowded room. I only caught a glimpse of his eyes, but I saw that they were painfully red and bleared and dripping like an old faucet, as tears were rolling down his face and collecting at his jawline. A second later he spun around, squaring his
shoulders to the front of the room. Before I could even process this in my mind, Ryan was squirming past legs and feet and knees to get to the end of the row. He tripped on the last foot in his path but caught himself as he stumbled into the aisle. With no pause or hesitation, he bolted down the aisle toward the front of the room. A man in the fifth or sixth row reached out for him, but Ryan, the fastest kid in our class, lowered his head, clobbering the guy in the shoulder. The man recoiled as Ryan bounced off of him and kept on going. Upon reaching the front row, he took a giant leap onto the podium, ignoring the four or five stairs right next to him, but his trailing foot caught on the edge of the podium, and he crashed spread-eagle onto the raised surface. Again, no pause or hesitation followed. Ryan picked himself up, staggered around the table, crumpled to his knees, and threw himself into Mrs. Kilkelly’s lap, his arms embracing her about the waist. Ryan’s foster mom stood up and reached out with her hand but didn’t say anything, and I had to lean to see around her. Mrs. Kilkelly had one arm around his shoulders, and with the other hand, she was smoothing the hair on his head, shhhhhhing and whispering and crying.

Mrs. Dwyer finished that cruel April and the somber May that succeeded it. Ryan and I didn’t play at recess anymore. Instead, we just walked around and around the recess yard, occasionally bending over to pick a dandelion and absent-mindedly destroy it. Sometimes we talked about Mrs. Kilkelly, sometimes about his parents, both old and new, but mostly we talked about God. Well, he talked about God. He kept asking me to come with him to Sunday school, so finally I asked my parents, and they said I could. The Graftons picked me up on Sunday mornings and nights, and I liked learning about God’s Son, Jesus. Encouraged, Ryan would talk
more and more about church, and I was surprised to see him acting so politely and obediently at school. Sure, we still got into trouble, but his bitterness and fierceness were gone.

One day, as we were riding our bicycles in the park where Ryan and I would meet on Saturday afternoons (his foster parents were always there too), we were surprised to see Mrs. Kilkelly drive up in her car. As she stepped out, we pedaled over to her and stopped beneath the shadow of a gnarled elm next to the bike path.

“Hi, Mrs. Kilkelly!” we called.

“Hello, boys. How are you?” She was all smiles, soft and young-looking again.

“Oh, okay,” I said, straddling my bike.

She bent over, putting her hands on her knees to see us more directly. “Well, I can’t stay long, but I saw you boys over here from the road and thought I’d stop to say good-bye.”

“Good-bye?” Ryan was confused and so was I.

“Yes, I’m moving to my sister’s in Ohio.”

“Oh.”

“I just wanted to tell you that, that you both are very smart and very strong young men and that I’m proud of both of you.”

“Why do you have to go?” Ryan asked.

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but it’s time for me to move on.” We were both used to the ambiguous answers that adults could give, so we just nodded as if we understood. “Do you think you could give this old lady a hug?”

“Sure, but you’re not old,” I smiled. We set our bikes on the ground and hugged her at the same time. I remember she squeezed us pretty tightly, and I thought I heard her sniff a few
times, but when I looked at her she wasn’t crying, or, at least, she’d concealed it. She released us
then and just stood looking at us for a second with her head tilted to one side and with a sad half-
smile on her face. We really didn’t know what to say, so we just stood there, fidgeting a little.
After a second or two, she turned and climbed back into her car, so Ryan and I remounted our
bikes.

“Bye, boys,” she called as she started her engine.

“Bye.”

“Jared, is that the bicycle Graham gave you?”

I looked down at the bright blue frame and the shining chrome of the tire rim. “Um, yes,
ma’am.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” she said, more to herself than to me. After calling a few more
good-byes, she shifted gears and turned around; then I watched her drive away.

“I’m gonna miss her,” Ryan said. I turned to look at him and was surprised to see such a
sad look on his face. Gone was that short, little general who used to order everyone around,
spinning lies to hide his own weaknesses, and I was glad for the change, for the first time really
aware of it, as I compared the old Ryan with the new. I studied him for a second longer, then
looked at Graham’s bicycle and decided I wanted a piece of that same kind of sureness.

“What?” Ryan asked, noticing what must have been a far-away look on my face.

“Tell me more about that friend of yours and Graham’s. Tell me more about Jesus,” I said.
“Okay.” Ryan took off on his bike before I did, but I caught up quickly, emerging from the shadow of that large elm to ride up beside him. Then, with the sun reigning in the bright June sky, Ryan began to tell me about that Friend as we pedaled across the park.