



SAMMIE & BUDGIE



a novel by

SCOTT SEMEGHAN



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For My Wife Lori and My Kids - Mia, Sophia, Ahnika, and Colin

and

For all the loving fathers--past, present, future--who adore their children and do not get the credit they deserve. I see you, gentlemen.
Keep up the good work.

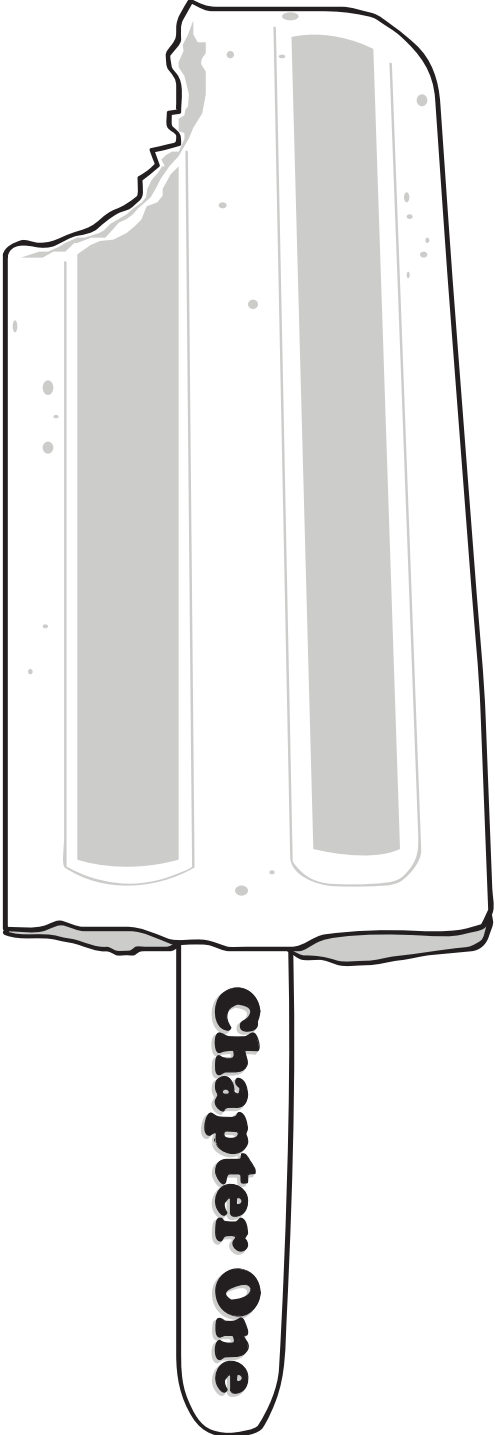


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"The mind of man is capable of anything--because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future." Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

"Every person you look at, you can see the universe in their eyes, if you're really looking." George Carlin, *40 Years of Comedy*



Chapter One

Chapter One

I discovered that my boy, Sammie--my son, my first child, my spawn, a chip off my ol' block, my heart and my soul--could see the future, that he could tell me what was going to happen before it happened, when he was in the third grade. I discovered this by dumb luck. Now, what I'm about to tell you, I'm telling you in the strictest of confidence. I mean, I'm telling you because I feel you need to know and I just don't go around telling everyone in the goddamn world my business because, well, it's *my business*; but I like *you* and that's all that matters. My boy, Sammie, was considered special by all accounts, not just special because I learned he could see the future, but special for two reasons: 1) he went through intensive testing and was designated as a child with special education needs by the State of Texas and 2) he's special because *I said* he's special. A father knows what a father knows, and I knew, without a doubt, that my boy was special. It's true.

Even before Sammie Boy was born, I had a feeling he was special (I call him Sammie Boy all the time--even now--because that's what I like to call him). When he was still living in the cramped efficiency apartment that was his mother's womb, he would kick and punch all over the place in a manner that made me feel like he was communicating with me in some type of fetal Morse Code. His mother would always tell me, 'Play our baby some music because I've read that playing our baby music while it is still in utero helps its intelligence.' So, I would do that. I'd get a Walkman or iPod or whatever was around, I'd put some classical music on, and place the headphones around his mother's overgrown stomach, and play the music loud so Sammie Boy could hear it. And whenever I would start the music, he would start kicking and punching all over the goddamn place, more punching when he disliked the music and less punching when he seemed to like it. Whenever I played any pop music, good ol' Sammie Boy seemed to hate it. He'd start punching and kicking and jabbing and stomping at such a furious rate that I thought he'd bust out of his mother's stomach like one of those hideous alien babies in the *Alien* movies. I played him all kinds of music to see what he would like: classical music, rock music, hip-hop music, country music, and even movie soundtracks. But the type of music that I discovered that he liked the most was jazz music, particularly John Coltrane songs and albums. He loved the shit out of some John Coltrane music--all the punching and kicking and stomping and jabbing and head-butting would cease the minute this music started. It really did, especially when I played the album *Blue Train*.

But what really made me aware of the fact that my boy Sammie was special was the day I picked him up from elementary school and he told me his after-school counselor was going to hurt herself in a serious way. I thought that to be a very strange thing for him to say, since Sammie didn't particularly have a malicious bone in his body, but was unsettling even more since my boy wasn't known to tell lies. Outside the school, out in the back where the playground and basketball court stretched beyond the portable buildings, I watched all the kids run and play while his counselor stood alone, keeping an eye on the children. It was a warm, humid day and the kids swarmed around the counselor like excited bees circling a sunflower.

I knelt next to my boy, placing my hands on his arms, and braced him gently, when I said, "What do you mean she will hurt herself?" Now, you have to understand, my boy Sammie was the cutest kid you will ever lay your eyes on, with big, round, brown eyes and a round face, tussled brown hair that never seemed to keep the style it started with in the morning, and a smile that would make a serial killer renounce his depravity and perform cartwheels in a field of daisies. Even in this serious situation, where I would have to compose myself to find answers, I had to fight the urge to pinch his cheeks and giggle. He was just that cute. "She looks fine to me," I said.

Sammie Boy looked over where the counselor stood, his sparkling, brown eyes examining her, the lids closing slightly as he peered at her, as if making out what her next move might be, and resolute sadness appeared on his cute, little face. "Daddy, can I ask you a question?" he said.

"Of course, my boy. You can ask me a question."

"Will you be *mad* at me if I tell you the truth?"

"Why would I be mad at you?" I said, firmly gripping his arms, as if to let him know how strongly I felt about expressing my true feelings to him, to comfort him. That's what a parent should do, right? A parent should be like a rock, like a sturdy thing that a delicate child could count on to protect him, and that's how I felt. I was Sammie's rock. It's true. "You should *always* tell me the truth. Always," I said.

"I don't know how I know, but I know. My brain is telling me," he said, his head tilting toward his chest, as if heavy from guilt for knowing something I couldn't quite comprehend. He wouldn't look at me.

I turned and looked at the counselor, an occasional errant kid running toward her then around her and using her as a swinging pole, she seemed fine and not in any way in danger or in a position to be seriously hurt by anyone or anything. Sammie wouldn't look at me anymore, his head heavy on the end of his limp neck. He drew imaginary circles on the ground with the tip of his Converse sneaker. I felt really bad for him because he seemed genuinely worried. I could tell.

"I think she'll be fine. How about we go get some ice cream on the way home? Would you like that?" I stood up, releasing his arms and gently placing my hands on his shoulders. He looked at me, a bigger smile on his face than I had seen in a while, since the morning at least.

"Really? Baskin Robbins?!"

"Sure, go get your backpack and tell the counselor goodbye."

"OK!"

He ran across the black top toward the counselor, who stood a few feet away from a metal bench that all of the kids' backpacks sat on, lined up in a multi-colored row of bright, pastel colors of the girls' backpacks and deep, primary colors of the boys' backpacks: ponies and unicorns for the girls, Marvel and DC superheroes for the boys. Sammie Boy waved to the counselor as he ran toward her and a sweet smile slid across her face. I could tell that she liked my son, with a look of sincere affection on her face, and she hugged him when he embraced her around her waist, waving for her to bring her face towards his. She knelt down and he whispered something in her ear, something that made her smile more than giggle. She patted him on the back and aimed him toward the metal bench where his backpack sat waiting for him. He slung his Spider-Man backpack over one shoulder and ran back to me. I waved to the counselor, relieved that nothing happened that would hurt her in a serious way, as my boy Sammie said would happen. Sometimes, kids say the weirdest things at the weirdest times and there really is no rhyme or reason to why they say these things. They just do, and what they say is like an involuntary burp that escapes your mouth an hour after lunch or a silent yet stinky fart that slips out while you're in an important meeting. It leaves an impression but doesn't mean anything at all. It's true.

I held Sammie's little hand and we walked toward my parked car when, suddenly, he tugged my arm and looked up at me, his little, round face pale and gaunt, his smile gone. An uneasy feeling tugged at the bottom of my stomach when I heard all the kids on the playground scream and, when I looked back, saw the counselor on her back, on the ground in front of the metal bench. I let go of Sammie's hand and ran toward the counselor, her body still and motionless in the dirt and grass and pebbles. All the kids on the playground came closer too, but not so close, as if keeping some distance between them and her would alleviate any blame that could come their way.

On the ground next to her, I got on one knee, touched her wrist, and knew she was still alive by the strong pulse under her skin. I didn't dare touch her head, being that it was at such a bizarre angle at the end of her neck, twisted closer to one shoulder than what seemed natural. I was in a state of shock as the kids inched their way closer and closer to their unconscious counselor, but all I was worried about was Sammie. Would it hurt his feelings that his premonition about his

counselor came true? I wasn't sure at the time how he felt about his power to see the future but I did know this: he felt bad about *something*.

"Sorry I told you the truth, Daddy," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. I was kind of sorry that I learned just how special my boy could be. Then I called 911.

Instead of buying Sammie an ice cream cone at Baskin Robbins, like I promised, I bought him a Popsicle from the cafeteria at the North Austin Medical Center, the hospital where the ambulance brought his after-school counselor. The ambulance arrived at the school pretty quick after I called 911 and I couldn't just *not* check on the poor counselor, leaving her outcome to just mere chance. Sammie insisted we go to the hospital too, even though I knew I would have to pick up Sammie's sister, Jessica (or Jessie, as I call her), from taekwondo. Luckily for me, Jessie could stay at taekwondo as long as her little heart desired because the instructor, Master Lu, taught late into the night and Jessie was never eager to leave practice anyway (she's a hardcore first-grader when it comes to taekwondo). So we followed the ambulance to the hospital and I promised Sammie I would buy him a snack if I could find him one, which we did, in the cafeteria.

As he ate his Popsicle while running laps around the table where I sat in the dining room of the cafeteria--brightly colored streams of sugary liquid running out of his mouth, down his cheeks and neck, and onto his striped t-shirt--I learned all kinds of unsavory things about Sammie's after-school counselor that I didn't know before (and wasn't quite sure I wanted to know). I learned that her name was Selena--pronounced say-LEE-nah--and that she still lived with her parents and she went to a bad high school on the east side of Austin and that she liked to drink beer and tequila together when she partied and often came to work quite hungover in her beat-up Nissan Sentra with lowered suspension and chrome wheels and that she had a boyfriend she called Big Papa (after the hip-hop song by Biggie Smalls aka The Notorious B.I.G.) but he didn't like to be called Big Papa because it made him feel *self-conscious* about his weight and he preferred to be called Stud Boy and she liked most of the kids in after-school care except for Juan and Jerome because they acted like thugs and on and on and on. Sammie could get going if I let him and, boy, was he on a roll that day while we waited to see if his counselor was OK. Sometimes, he gets a condition I like to call "diarrhea mouth" where he spews words out of his cute face at a pace that is much faster than his brain could possibly comprehend. A lot of people suffer from this condition, even adults, whether they realize it or not, what, with their

bragging about the newest gadget that they just bought, or the Caribbean cruise that they just booked, or the fancy restaurant that they ate at the night before, or whatever. Adults constantly talk about the most *inane* shit sometimes. It's true. But Sammie Boy, he also seemed to be afflicted with diarrhea mouth quite often (I think he got this condition from his mother, my ex-wife) and he had a severe case of it that day at the hospital.

After a while listening to him, I grew curious how he knew so much about his counselor Selena, so I said, "How do you know all of this, Sammie?"

"She tells us stuff *every day*. She loves to tell us about her life," he said, slurping on his Popsicle until it disintegrated. He revealed the Popsicle stick to me, its soggy, wooden composition stained from red and blue food-coloring, the word 'Popsicle' etched on it. I told him to toss it in the trash can by the entrance of the cafeteria but he shoved it in his pocket instead, just in case he needed it later for something important. Kids are always doing that, stashing trash for later. "She lives a *hard* life. What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with what?" I said.

"Selena telling us about her *hard* life?"

"Oh, well, she seems to give you so much *detail*. It's kind of unprofessional, I think."

"Un-pro-fesh-un-uhl--what is that?!"

"Nevermind. Do you want to go see how she's doing?"

"Yeah! Let's go!" he said, as he sprinted at full-speed out of the cafeteria and back toward where we came, a set of elevators around the corner and down a hall that ran next to the cafeteria. The hospital was blandly decorated and sparsely furnished as to not offend any of its patients' family members, some of which would occupy the random couches or chairs or stools far away from the dismal environments of the small, diseased rooms of their wives or husbands or sons or daughters or partners or whoever or, in our case, my son's after-school counselor. If you really examined the patterns of the carpet and the upholstery of the furniture, they were somewhere between a Southwest Santa Fe-style and a Jackson Pollock spew-fest, pastel patterns intermingling with muted primary color splatter. It was a curious choice for a hospital, bland and obnoxious at the same time. Sammie seemed to like the pattern of the carpet and he chose to run along the pattern as if it was a crazy road map, designed by a psychotic interior decorator. He zigged and zagged all the way to the elevator, making noises with his mouth as if he was a race car or a train or an airplane or a UFO, sometimes all at once.

"Push the button!" I said, waving at him to stop and not actually go in the elevator. "But wait for *me*!" The elevator dinged and Sammie bolted inside, prompting me to run to catch him before the door closed and separated us. Once there, I held the door open with the palm of

my hand then stood next to my boy. I could feel his heart pounding while I touched his shoulder. A Muzak, instrumental version of "Careless Whisper" by the band Wham! played from small speakers at the top of the elevator. "I told you to wait for me," I said, panting from being pudgy and doughy and all sorts of out of shape. I should spend more time at a gym or something, another thing to add to my lengthy to-do list.

"I did, Daddy! I did!"

"OK. OK," I said, the elevator taking us up a couple of floors. "Keep your pants on. Sheesh."

"My pants *are* on, Daddy," Sammie said. He peered out the glass back-side of our elevator car, his face and hands smashed against the clear glass, his breath fogging up his view. "The carpet looks like a rainbow explosion, Daddy!"

"It sure does," I said. It did look like a rainbow explosion from our vantage point, three-stories up, although my adult brain wouldn't have thought of it that way without him mentioning it. I think we lose some of that *creative vision* as we grow older, turning from curious children into jaded adults. Children have a way of seeing the world that is untarnished by experience or disappointment or adult's selfish bullshit. It's true.

"Daddy, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, but you don't have to keep saying, 'Can I ask you a question?' Just ask me the question."

"OK. Daddy, can I get a pet?"

The elevator bell dinged and the door opened. Sammie grabbed my hand and we walked out of the elevator together. His little hand fit perfectly inside my hand. At some point, "Careless Whisper" morphed into a tinkly instrumental version of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper.

"A pet? What kind of pet?" I said, squeezing his little hand gently.

"A bird!"

"What?! A bird?" We stopped and he looked up at me, his face shining with childish enthusiasm, his eyes aglow with sparkles and reflections from the fluorescent lights in the ceiling in his line of view above my head. He looked hypnotized.

"Yeah, a *budgerigar*! I want a budgie!"

"Birds are smelly and messy," I said, a little annoyed. We continued walking after I quickly dismissed his request.

"Budgie! Budgie! Budgie! That's what I would name it. Budgie!"

"I'll think about it."

"You always say that. And when you say, 'I'll think about it,' then that always means no."

"I'll think about it," I said, smiling.

"Daddy! Quit saying *that*!"

We found a reception counter that looked like the place to check-in but it wasn't stationed by anyone. So rather than continue into areas of the hospital we weren't sure we could walk into, we waited for someone to check us in. Sammie Boy didn't mind. He was full of life.

"Budgerigars are better known as parakeets. Do you know what a *parakeet* is?"

"Yes, Sammie, I know what a parakeet is." I looked around for a nurse or an administrative assistant or somebody but I didn't see anybody. The desk was a deserted, plywood island.

"Well, that's good," he said. "They are the third most popular pet *in the world*, behind dogs and cats of course."

"That's very interesting."

"I know! Very interesting, indeed." He drew imaginary circles in the rainbow-explosion carpet with the tip of his canvas sneaker. "So, can I get one?"

"I'll think about it."

He moaned a BIG sigh and threw his arms against his sides and exclaimed in an exasperated tone, "I'll *never* get one!" He made it seem like the world was ending, and maybe his little world was ending at that very second. Every disappointment in a child's life is always, and I mean *always*, monumental. Don't ask me why. It just is. Kids make a big deal about everything.

"Let's discuss it later," I said, then out of thin air a young woman sat down behind the counter. She was young and brunette and kind of slim (but kind of *not*) and a little irritated, apparently. The pastel cardigan she wore was a size too small; it squeezed her flesh into a succession of bulging rolls and folds, hills and valleys of overindulgence. She gave me a terse smile, part sincere and part deliberate. A name tag on her shirt said BETH.

"Can I help you?" she said. She rummaged through some papers and office supplies spread out on the desk.

"Yes, we'd like to see--what's her name, Sammie?" I said, looking at my boy. He tried to peek over the counter-top, his body stretching as high as his toes could push him, but he only could speak toward the ceiling.

"Selena! Her name is *Say-LEE-nah!*"

"Yes, can we see Selena?" I said, leaning on the counter-top with one elbow, smiling as sincerely as possible.

"Let me see if she's in our system." She typed furiously on the keyboard of her computer and as she typed, a serious look on her face, I couldn't help but think of the song *Beth* by the band *Kiss*, and their ridiculous music video with the band--in full-on makeup and leather outfits and high heels--sitting around a prissy brunette wearing a white, cardigan sweater, the drummer Peter Criss serenading her about how he was staying out late, playing with the boys in the band, not coming home soon, and shit like that. Maybe *this* Beth in the

hospital was mad after her boyfriend's all-nighter, sitting at home stewing because her Peter was out late, drinking with his buddies, having too much fun, and refusing to come home to her like she wanted him to. Maybe she drank too much cheap wine from a box in the refrigerator and put herself to sleep with thoughts of a better man out there, somewhere in the world, and woke up hung-over, drank a quart of coffee before heading to work at the hospital. I bet it's true. She typed some more as we waited.

"Right, there is a Selena in our system. Are you a family member?"

I looked at Sammie Boy and he looked at me and I realized that there was a certain *protocol* to situations like this. We weren't family members. We weren't even close friends of Say-LEE-nah. For all practical purposes, we were just concerned acquaintances, or as some would say, nose-y acquaintances. How strange.

"No, we're not family members. You see, my boy Sammie here, he's in after-school care. And Selena is a counselor at the elementary school. And we were there when she fell down and hurt herself. I was the one that called the ambulance."

"I see," Beth said, still pouty and unconcerned. Her boyfriend must have done a number on her the night before. I could tell. She was pretty annoyed. "Well, only family members and loved ones can go back and see patients. You'll just have to wait out here."

"OK," I said, looking at Sammie. "Let's go have a seat, son."

We found a seat nearby. I sat down and patted my legs for Sammie to sit on them. He flopped on my lap and wrapped his arms around my neck. He was a cute, little son-of-a-bitch, he was! And I say that with the deepest affection because it's true. I loved my boy with all my heart *and* his mother was an absolute bitch. But no worries, I'll get into that later. I squeezed my boy tightly.

"Is she going to be all right, Daddy?" he said, a distressed look on his face.

"I bet she'll be just fine. She's in the right place."

"All the doctors and nurses will take care of her?"

"Yep."

"They won't let her die or anything like that?"

"I hope not."

"Daddy," he said, perking up. "Maybe if I write Selena a note, then that grouchy lady at the desk will give it to her. Do you think she'll do that?"

"I don't know but you can try."

"OK!"

On a side table next to our chair was a cup filled with pens with 'VIAGRA' scrawled on their shafts as well as a pad of paper with 'PRILOSEC' emblazoned at the top. Good ol' Sammie Boy grabbed a pen and the pad of paper and earnestly wrote a quick note to his counselor--a sweet, sentimental note that said how worried he was for

her and that he hoped she was all right and not hurt and how sorry he was for knowing that she was going to hurt herself. When I saw him write that, I tapped him on the shoulder and advised that he erase that part. I didn't want him incriminating himself in any way but I appreciated his thoughtfulness. He erased the 'knowing that she was going to hurt herself' part and signed the note, 'Love, Sammie.'

"Can I give this to the lady at the desk to give to Selena?"

I nodded and watched Sammie run over to Beth, her scowl turning into a sweet, closed-mouth smile. Even a sourpuss like jaded Beth couldn't resist the charms of my cute kid. Sammie gave her the note and whispered some instructions into her ear. Beth stood up and walked away while good ol' Sammie Boy returned to my lap. He was very happy and pleased with himself.

"She said she'd give it to Selena," he said, smiling, beaming with pride.

"Good. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, I just hope she's all right."

We sat there for a few, quiet moments, Sammie swinging his legs back and forth, my arms around my little boy. He sure was special, all right, not just in the special needs way, but in a *kind-spirited* way. A lot of kids his age, kids that are in the third or fourth grade, their personalities were starting to curdle, starting to turn into something less kind, less child-like. They wanted to be teenagers. They wanted to be more grown-up. They liked to cuss, learned about sexy things from their siblings, and watched TV shows with violence and foul language and kids behaving badly and stuff like that. But not my Sammie. He was as innocent as could be, with a pure heart and pure intention. He was a really good kid. It's true.

"Daddy?" he said.

"Yes, my boy?"

"Can I draw on that paper while we wait?"

"Sure," I said, giving him the Viagra pen and the Prilosec pad of paper. With his tongue curling through his pursed lips, he hunched over the pad of paper and doodled a little bird flying through the air, a circle for a sun and three bumpy clouds high above the tiny avian creature. He drew what looked like a letter 'B' on the bird's chest.

"What's the 'B' stand for?" I said, curious about his letter choice, when Beth walked back toward us with a piece of paper in her hand. When she got to where we sat, she knelt down in front of us and handed Sammie the piece of paper. Her sour disposition was gone, replaced by a sweet demeanor that I didn't see there before. Maybe Beth didn't have such a bad night after all.

"I shouldn't be doing this but here's a note from Selena. You're a sweet boy!" She patted him on the head and went back to her desk.

Sammie smiled at me and said, "Can I read it, Daddy?" I nodded and this is what the note said:

Thank you for checking on me, Sammie. You're a good kid and my favorite of all the kids in after-school care! I have epilepsy and I had a seizure. I'm sorry that it scared you but it's something I have to deal with all the time. Please don't worry, Sammie. I'll probably see you back at the school next week. Take care and be good, Selena.

"She's going to be all right," Sammie said. He folded the note and put it in his pocket along with the Popsicle stick.

"That's good," I said, placing him on his feet. "We need to go pickup your sister from taekwondo."

"Do we *have* to?" Sammie said, whining. "Can't she just walk home?!"

"No, she can't just *walk* home."

"Why not?"

"Because that would make me a bad parent."

"You're not a bad parent. You're the best daddy, EVER!"

"Ever?" I said.

"Forever and ever!"

"That's a very long time."

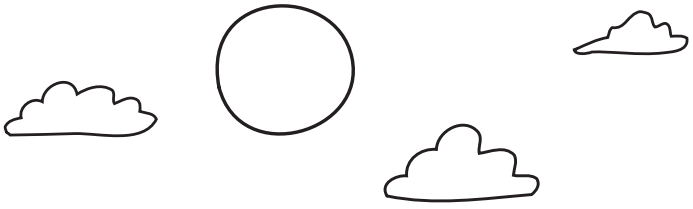
"I know! Daddy, can I get Budgie on the way home?"

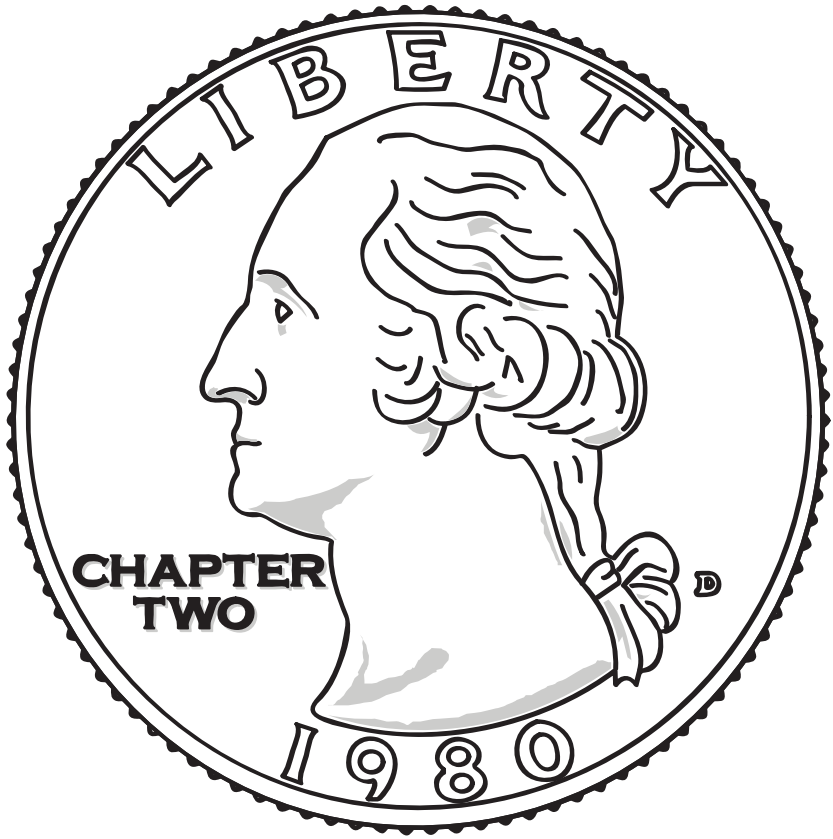
"No, not today."

"PLEASE!"

I grabbed good ol' Sammie Boy's hand and we walked over the rainbow explosion, leaving grouchy Beth and poor Selena behind, leaving the erectile-dysfunctional pens and the acid-reflux pads of paper on the table, and out of the hospital and back to our normal life. We found my car and hopped in, ready to retrieve Sammie's sister and possibly buy ice cream or hamburgers or tacos.

I couldn't help but think that this day would turn out like that, what, with Sammie's counselor hitting the deck, being rushed to the emergency room, and me and my boy spending an hour or so in a dreary hospital. Being a parent to a special kid leads to very unexpected things in very unexpected ways. It's true.





Chapter Two

I had an evening ritual with my kids that I held close to my heart. It was something my therapist came up with to help ease the solemn feeling over dinner we experienced the first few weeks after moving into my apartment, our new home following my divorce from their mother then, later, her unexpected death. I know; sounds pretty goddamn tragic, right? I'll get into that sad story later. But it was a hard adjustment for all of us, going from living in a large two-story, suburban home to a small two-bedroom apartment in a decent apartment complex outside of our neighborhood. During the divorce, their mother and I couldn't agree on what to do with our family home. So, beyond any discussions of what would be best for good ol' Sammie boy and his sister Jessie, we had to sell our home, the solution to all of our typical procedural squabbling. Their mother moved in with her full-of-shit-salesman boyfriend. I rented a two-bedroom apartment with a full-dining room and a garage. It was the largest place I could afford and the only sane option for me after the financial disaster of divorce. The idea of being crushed under a new mortgage was not very appealing to me. An apartment was not very appealing either but it was the best I could do at the time.

Anyway, once we moved into my apartment and got used to our new schedule based on the elaborate, custody mathematics in the decree, the three of us had family dinners together in a new home with our new family dynamic. It was glaringly apparent that there were three of us instead of four and the new eating configuration was strange, indeed, for all of us. Like I said, a solemn cloud would set over dinner, which made it difficult to enjoy our time together, let alone just chew our food. It was brutal! I mean, there were no proclamations of *bon appétit* or *c'est la vie* or whatever at dinner, that's for sure. It's true.

After a few of these dreadfully sour dinners, I discussed what I could do to lift the solemn cloud with my therapist, Charlotte. She had been my therapist ever since their mother and I separated, which was something like three years before, and after a few minutes of deep reflection, she said to me, "School is a very stressful time for your children. It's a long day for kids that age. And then there is the added stress of living in a new home. And their mother is *dead*. So, rather than start a conversation like, 'How was your day?' you should ask them something more specific like, 'Tell me something *silly* that happened to you today?'"

I thought this was a fun idea! Charlotte was full of fun ideas like this one. I eventually worked this routine into our nightly dinners. One night, I turned to Jessie, my daughter. Normally, she was a vivacious

kid--full of life. But her sour disposition drooped down her face and almost seemed to drip onto her plate of chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese; she looked that sad! I felt really bad for her but I was determined to lift the mood in our apartment. I put Charlotte's fun suggestion into action.

"So," I said, plopping my palms on the dining room table-top. The sudden noise of my hands hitting the wood startled my poor, little kids. It was like they awoke from a deep sleep, groggy and limp-lidded. "Tell me something *silly* that happened today."

"At school?" she said, unsure of what I was trying to get at.

"No, on *Mars*. Yes, at school! Were you somewhere else today?" I said, closing one eye and focusing my open eye on her like a pirate peering through a scallywag's unkempt uniform and deep into her troubled soul.

"Oh, OH, YES! This girl, in my class, her name is Christina. She loves to drink chocolate milk and she was drinking it and drinking it when that boy Chris, he started telling a joke."

"Uh huh," I said, nodding while chewing my dinner of chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese. I know what you're thinking. 'What the fuck?' I usually ate what my kids ate for dinner--peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, mac and cheese, pepperoni pizza, mashed potatoes with gravy--whatever was easiest to make. I mean, I only had enough time in the day to cook and whatever my kids were eating was what I was going to be eating. It's that simple. I looked at Sammie Boy. He wasn't impressed with Jessie's story so far. He rolled his eyes, pushing his food around the plate into new, food pile configurations.

"I know how this will turn out," he said, then shoveling mac and cheese into his mouth.

"Son, let her finish. Continue!"

Sammie harrumphed.

"It was a 'Knock, Knock' joke. It went something like this." Then she pushed her chair back and stood up, acting out the 'Knock, Knock' joke, holding her clinched fist in the air, ready to rap on an imaginary door. "Knock, knock." She looked at me to answer.

"Oh, right! 'Who's there?'" I said, perking up.

"Orange."

"Orange, who?"

"Orange you glad I didn't say banana! Then that boy Chris, he had a banana on his lunch tray so he picked it up and he put it in Christina's face, right in front of her face. Then, all of a sudden, chocolate milk shot out of her nose!"

Good ol' Sammie Boy, he started laughing all over the place, his head went back and he slapped his knee, then he held his stomach cause he was laughing so hard, chunks of half-chewed chicken nuggets shooting from his mouth. I guess her story wasn't so hum-drum after all.

"I knew you were going to say that but it's still funny, sis."

"I know!" she said, beaming from the approval of her big brother. It was sweet seeing them laughing and talking and interacting. It was a nice change from the somber dinners from the previous few weeks. She sat back down and continued eating, much more chipper now.

"What about you?" I said, looking at Sammie. He was still snickering from his sister's story. "That's a hard one to top. Anything silly happen to you today?"

"Yeah."

"Then tell us."

"Well, this boy I know, Dez, he was teaching me how to play this new game. He calls it *Thump*. It's a game you play with a quarter. Do you know it?"

"No," I said, eating more mac and cheese, which was actually pretty good, if I say so myself. "I've never heard of that game. How do you play?"

"Well, do you have a quarter? I'll show you guys if you gimme a quarter."

I reached in my pocket for some change but didn't have anything in my pockets. I had left the contents of my pockets in a bowl on the kitchen counter after we got home.

"You'll have to get one from the kitchen."

"OK. Follow me!" He leapt from his chair, ran around the dining room table, and went into the kitchen, his feet stomping on the apartment floor. He rummaged through the bowl on the counter and found a quarter. He raised it into the air like he found a piece of buried treasure. "Got it! Come here and I'll show you."

He sat on the kitchen floor then Jessie and I made our way into the kitchen and sat down with him, the three of us in a circle. He propped the quarter on its side and held it up by holding the top of the coin with the tip of his index finger, the profile of George Washington peering in the distance.

"So, this is how you play *Thump*! Two people or more sit on the floor and the first one thumps the edge of the quarter to make it spin." Good ol' Sammie Boy flicked the edge of the quarter and it spun in front of him like a miniature dreidel, spinning around in an oval path on the kitchen floor. "Then the next person has to thump the quarter to keep it spinning. Like this." He flicked the quarter again and it kept spinning on its edge, a little wobbly this time but still spinning nonetheless. "If it falls down on someone's turn or they make it fall, they lose."

Just then, Jessie threw herself on the kitchen floor and slammed her hand on top of the quarter, like a cat swatting at a moth. Sammie was horrified that his sister interrupted his demonstration.

"Heads or tails, big brother!" she said, giggling and laughing as she covered the coin, repelling Sammie's prying hands from retrieving the

coin. Now, you may think that boys are stronger than girls but in this case, you'd be dead wrong. Jessie was a pretty tough cookie for her size. Sammie didn't stand a chance against her. It's true.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" he said, still attempting to retrieve the coin from under his naughty sister's paws.

"Heads or tails? Call it!"

"That's not the game we are playing right now," he said, very upset at his sister's precociousness, but unwilling to engage with her any longer.

"Please!"

"Fine! Heads!" Jessie lifted her hand and it was heads, just as he'd said. "Are you happy?"

"Again! Let's do it again!"

"No," he said, crossing his arms, defiantly.

"Please! PLEASE! PLEASE!!" she said, begging.

"If I do it again, then can we play *Thump*?" he said. She nodded. "Fine." He flicked the quarter again and it spun on its side, wobbling topsy-turvy in its unusual orbit around some particles on the kitchen floor: bread crumbs, dry cereal, hair strands, dust bunnies. Without warning, Jessie again slammed her hand on the spinning quarter, interrupting its wobbly course.

"Heads or tails? Call it!"

"Heads," he said, sighing, already bored with this game.

"You already called heads!"

"Because it is *heads*."

She slowly lifted her hand to reveal that it certainly was heads again. Her face twisted into a look of contempt and bitterness, a thing she always did when a game she started took a turn for the worse, or rather, not her way.

"This game isn't fun anymore!" She jumped up and stormed to the other side of the apartment--in their room--where all her toys were waiting for her and her brother was not. Sammie snickered.

"Dad, will you play *Thump* with me?" he said, begging, his hands praying for my acceptance.

"Sure."

"Yeah! I go first!" he said, returning to his ready position on the kitchen floor. He quickly flicked the coin and it spun on its side, slowly following a curved path toward me. I cocked my finger under my thumb and waited for the right time to thump the spinning coin. As it spun, it whirred and whizzed in a small circle. When the right time arrived, I gently thumped the coin and it continued to spin between us, its trajectory altered. "All right, daddy! You did it. My turn."

As he waited his turn, I watched him, his eyes on the coin like a cat waiting to pounce on another unsuspecting moth. I hadn't seen him this focused on something--anything--in a long while. But for some reason while I watched him, an image of Selena the after-school

counselor appeared in my mind, her body twisted on the asphalt of the playground behind the school, and I thought of good ol' Sammie Boy telling me that she was seriously going to hurt herself right before it happened. I was curious. How did he know that was going to happen? Was it a fluke that he knew what was going to happen to her *before* it happened? Or could he see what's going to happen before it happens, even if I asked him? So, I thought, 'What the hell? I'll ask him.'

"Sammie, can you tell me what will show when the coin falls and this game is over--heads or tails?"

"Yes, daddy." He flicked the coin and it continued to spin. "It's your turn!"

"OK. What will it be--heads or tails?"

"Tails," he said, without hesitation.

Just then, I flicked the coin and it slid across the kitchen floor and slammed into the metal, oven door. It made a loud clanking noise then fell on its side, lifeless now, tails side up. It must have been a fluke. There was no way that my cute, little boy could see the future. I picked up the coin and held it between us, pinched between my thumb and index finger.

"I'm going to flip this coin in the air and you tell me--heads or tails. OK?"

"OK. Tails."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I flipped the coin in the air, it's metallic surface glimmering as it tumbled head over tails up, arcing in the air, then down to my hand. I caught it, then slapped it on top of my other hand. When we looked at the coin together, it was tails. "See!"

"Again." When I flipped it, he called heads and then it was heads. Again, he called tails and then it was tails and so on. We did this together like, what, 20 times and he called it on the nose every single time. He didn't even bat an eye. It was amazing! And weird. It's true. My skin began to crawl, covered in goosebumps and stiff hairs. "How do you do that?" I said, astonished. "If I keep going, then you'll know them all, which side will show?"

My little boy lowered his head, shame and embarrassment weighing it down. His excitement for playing the game was gone. He wrapped his arms around himself, squeezing his torso gently, hugging himself firmly. He was acting like I was upset with him, the way kids do when they find themselves in a jam. But I wasn't upset with him at all. With my hand beneath his chin, I lifted his head gently.

"Will you be mad if I tell you the truth?" he said.

"I won't be mad," I said. I was telling the truth. I wouldn't have been mad at all.

"I really don't know how I know. I just know."

"I see," I said, disappointed at the vagueness of his answer, his non-answer. Kids are always doing that: giving non-answers. It's their way

of protecting themselves from getting in trouble. But parents are smarter than that. We know what the non-answer really means. It means they are hiding something.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Oh, no, no, of course not. But it's getting late. You know? You should probably brush your teeth and get ready for bed."

"OK. But can I have the quarter?" he said, lifting his hand, the palm side up, his arm propped by his other arm at the elbow.

"Sure."

I dropped the coin in his hand and he slipped it into his pocket.

"I'll put it with the Popsicle stick," he said, running to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He was such a cute kid. Just looking at him made my heart melt. It's true. And *clairvoyant* to boot, it seemed. Crazy, huh? I mean, I wasn't quite sure at the time if he could see the future or not but it certainly seemed that way.

The balcony to my apartment, on the second floor at the back corner of my building, overlooked the driveway to my garage as well as the property that surrounded the back of my apartment complex. It was one of those types of apartment complexes that looked pretty fancy from the street out front but once you pulled into the complex and drove around the labyrinthine parking lot, the real lives of the tenants revealed itself: windows covered in aluminum foil and the clotheslines on the balconies and the late model cars with flat tires--lives not so fancy after all. On my balcony were only three things: a wooden bench and a wooden chair--their frames weathered and grayed and splintered and the support structure to countless spiders and their webs and their trapped meals--and an old coffee can. The seat cushions of the chairs had long-ago been tossed in the trash, victims of a malodorous assault by the old family dog who had been sprayed in the face by a cantankerous skunk then wiped her stinky dog face on the cushions until the skunk stench coated every atom of the material. It wasn't so bad sitting on the skeletal frame of the bench or chair as long as I positioned my spine or hip bones between the splintery wooden slats and not directly on them. After putting the kids to bed almost every night, I would sneak out onto the balcony, sit my boney butt on the wooden chair, and I would quietly smoke cigarettes and think about the predicament that my life had descended into. I kept asking myself when thinking about the last few years of my miserable life, 'How did this happen?' Shit, you know how these things happen. Right? They just... happen. That's life, they say. You know? That's what all the know-it-alls and the smarty-pants and the too-good-for-

yous and the uppity-assholes of the world say. They think they know everything. It's true.

The balcony was my place of refuge, where I smoked cigarettes and drank cheap beer and watched the sun set as well as my anonymous neighbors walk their rat dogs or take their trash to the dumpster or chase their hyper children around or haphazardly park their cars. After my kids brushed their teeth and went to bed, I planted my boney butt on the wooden chair. It was getting late at this point so there weren't too many people to watch, just a large woman talking loudly into her cell phone--her dark, curly hair perched on the top of her head with a banana clip and her terry-cloth bathrobe struggling to stay on her stout body--telling the person on the other end of the line just how much of a bitch her boss was, which was always the case. Whose boss isn't a bitch? Silly question. As I watched her shuffle away, her whining and moaning blending with the other sounds of the night--a cacophony of cicadas, crickets, mockingbirds, and mysterious night creatures serenading the setting sun--I saw some motion in the corner of my eye. I looked over at my window, the one that looked out from the kids' bedroom. A pair of small eyes watched me, peeking through the mini-blinds, little fingers prying the blinds open, scrutinizing me, and curiously monitoring what I was doing. I knew it was good ol' Sammie Boy. He always had a hard time getting to sleep and this time was probably no different. I stood up and went inside my apartment--quietly closing the door behind me--and sat on the couch. I knew he would make his way out to the living and, sure enough, he did.

He sat with me on the couch, laying his head on my stomach, and said, "You smell like smoke, Daddy."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry about that." I placed my hand on his back. I could feel his lungs inflate then deflate as he held me.

"You shouldn't smoke. At school, my teacher showed the class a picture of a smoker's lungs. They were *black*! Do you think your lungs are black like that, Daddy?"

"I don't know," I said, taking a deep breath, then sighing. "I really hope not."

He quickly jumped up and stood in front of me, his fists pressed into his hips like a comic book super hero getting ready to belch out his heroic soliloquy while standing over a defeated foe, and he said pointing at me, "You shouldn't shmoke those nasty shmigarettes, Daddy!" I chuckled. Before I go on, let me explain something to you.

Just so you know, Sammie Boy had this cute habit of adding 'shm' to words and changing the way they sounded, encoding them into his own form of the English language. He called it *Shmenglish*. For instance, instead of saying 'apple,' he would say 'shmapple.' And instead of saying 'television,' he would say 'shmelevision.' When he spoke Shmenglish, he would ask me for things like 'shmookies' or 'shmotato shmips.' It was freakin' adorable. I loved it!

As this new and enigmatic mode of language sunk into his little brain over time, he eventually started to recite entire sentences in Shmenglish. In the past, if me or his mother would ask him to do a chore like, 'Sammie, take out the trash,' then he would respond, 'Shmammie, shmake out the shmash!' He would stop whatever it was he was doing and run around in circles shrieking, 'Shmake out the shmash! Shmake out the shmash! Shmake out the shmash!' and continuing on in this manner yet never doing what we asked him to do which was: take out the trash. It was a diversion tactic that worked pretty well for him for a while. Most parents have a soft spot for little things their kids do that they find cute. Of course, no one else found this behavior to be cute at all--not his mother, his sister, his teachers, his grandparents, his friends' parents--nobody. I was the sole, approving, audience member of his Shmenglish monologues, his only fan, his *shmonly shman*, and Sammie knew this. Boy, did he eat that shit up, too. I soon became fluent in all things Shmenglish.

Once it was common knowledge that *nobody* liked hearing things repeated in Shmenglish but me, it became a form of communication spoken only between the two of us--me and my boy. In private, we would carry on entire conversations in Shmenglish, stopping only when one of us just couldn't take it anymore, laughing and coughing and gasping for air, or when things got serious. And I was completely aware that this was probably only amusing to me and good ol' Sammie Boy but I didn't care. I cherished these conversations with him, even if they were ridiculous. Well, mostly ridiculous. He was such an adorable kid, I tell you. It's true.

"Shmigarettes are bad for your shmealth!" he continued.

"Shmeally?" I said, the corner of my mouth tweaking upwards, straining to hold back a laugh.

"Shmes! Shmeally!" He then tumbled on top of me, giggling and laughing all over the place. He thought that was just the funniest thing in the entire world.

I put my arms around him and laughed too, even though I was a little embarrassed that I was being scolded for smoking by my third-grade son. What could I say to him? The truth of why I smoked even though I knew my lungs were probably as black as the inside of a BBQ grill just wasn't good enough for him. There was a time when I didn't smoke, which seemed so long ago.

"You're a good kid, Sammie Boy, but it's past your bedtime," I said, patting his little back.

"But I'm not *tired!*" he said, pleading, his arms and legs gesticulating as if he was running even though he was laying across my lap.

"It doesn't matter. You still need to go to bed. Do you want me to tuck you in?"

"No," he said, kissing me on the cheek then slowly walking back to his room, his head down, a sigh punctuating his exasperation. "I'm a *big boy* now. I don't need a tuck in." He disappeared into his and his little sister's room, closing the door gently behind him. But before I could compose myself enough to stand back up and sneak back onto the balcony to smoke more shameful cigarettes and drink more cheap beer, good ol' Sammie Boy flung his bedroom door open and came running back into the living room as fast as he could, a piece of paper in his little, clinched fist. He slammed the paper on the coffee table then ran back to his room, screaming, "I drew this for you!" This time, he slammed his bedroom door shut.

I stared at the crinkled paper on the coffee table, Manila paper with rough edges ripped from his spiral sketchbook (the one he carried with him *everywhere*), a drawing in black ink throughout the folds and creases of his wadded, paper canvas. I picked up the paper, unfolded it, and examined the line art of a boy sitting next to a bird--a big toothy grin on the boy's content face, the bird with a blank look, both of them sitting in a sparse world, nothing around them. Underneath the picture, the words 'Sammie & Budgie' scrawled in my boy's meticulous scribble, the drawing depicting the passive-aggressive way in which I knew he was attempting to keep his wish of owning a pet bird in the front of my mind. I thought it funny that he would even think I would forget anything he said or did or wanted. I loved being a dad and I loved being Sammie and Jessie's dad. I knew--at a very young age--that I wanted to be a dad. As far as I knew, I always wanted to be a dad. Being a dad was my calling. It's true.



Sammie and Jessie went to a very normal elementary school in a very normal suburban neighborhood outside of Austin, Texas. The neighborhood was called Wells Port and the school was called Wells Port Elementary (brilliant, huh?). Built in the 1980s, the neighborhood had grown from a cookie-cutter tract development with little planning into a diverse, tight-knit, established community. Sammie was in the third-grade and Jessie was in the first-grade. The routine of getting them to school was pretty simple. It consisted of waking them up, feeding them toasted frozen waffles, helping them pick out their clothes without violating any major fashion rules (Did I even know the rules?), and making sure they brushed their teeth and their hair while I went downstairs to the garage to start the car and throw their school stuff in the trunk. Inevitably, whenever I opened the door to the garage, they would lose their little minds and run out in mid-whatever they were doing--tooth brushes in their mouths or brushes in their hair or half-way dressed and undressed or one shoe on and one shoe in-hand or whatever half-assed task they were lazily attempting to complete. The sound of the door to the garage creaking open always sent them into an impassioned, freakazoid panic. It happened every time like clockwork. Little kids are predictable little creatures. It's true.

The door would creak open and they would run out saying, "Daddy! Daddy! Don't leave yet!"

Which always had me asking the same rhetorical question. "Why do you think I'm leaving you?" Then they would stand there, dumbfounded--toothpaste dripping down their chins or hair brushes dangling in their tangled hair or their stomachs undulating along with their panting from sprinting to the kitchen--looking at me like I was severely abusing them, which I wasn't. Kids can be so melodramatic sometimes. It's simply what they do. "The whole reason for *my existence* at this point in my life is to take you to and from school."

"Oh, good!" they would always say, returning to the bathroom or their bedroom to complete whatever they were doing.

So I would drowsily descend the stairs to my garage, their backpacks and hoodies and lunch boxes in my arms, attempting to not fall down the stairs and bash my head open on the landing, opening the garage door and placing all of their crap in the trunk of my car: a white, 2000 Volvo S70. Now, there are some who would say that a Volvo S70 is a luxury car. I fully admit that there was also a time when I truly believed a car like a Volvo or a BMW or a Volkswagen or some shit like that was considered a luxury vehicle even though I knew--after owning this car for a couple of years and surviving a few painful visits to the auto mechanic--that cars like this were really just

albatrosses tied to your wallet like an anvil chained to your bank account, quickly sinking to the bottom of the deep blue, murky sea of diminishing returns. But for whatever reason, I still wanted to own a Volvo S70. My desire to own this car occupied a place in my brain that couldn't have been satiated by owning any other non-luxury vehicle; it had to be *this car*. And boy, did my wallet take a hit by owning this money pit. It really did. I might as well have set my wallet and debit card and credit cards and bank account on fire and let them burn to ashes. It spent an inordinate amount of time in the shop. More times than not, the Volvo wouldn't start or--if it started at all--it would come to life in fits and starts, as if it was going to eventually explode. Aargh! On a good morning, I would throw their school things in the trunk, start the car, and be ready to take them to school. This particular morning was pretty good; the Volvo started right up.

Eventually upstairs, the kiddos would close the door and come flying down the stairs, stomping and clomping and jumping the whole way down. With all of their ruckus I knew, if my neighbor next to us was asleep, then she wasn't asleep anymore after they came down. They were an avalanche of feet, fists, screams, and laughter. They jumped in the back seat, buckled up, and we were off.

The elementary school was across the street but, even though it was so close, they managed to have enough time to attempt to murder each other while I drove. It always started the same: Jessie would tease Sammie Boy about something, like him liking a girl in his class or something along those lines and this would always incite an angry response from him, then the shoving started, then the crying. The next thing I knew, I wanted to pull over and murder them both myself. But that never happened. They were lucky I loved them so much. It's true.

Dropping them off at school was a two-part ritual. The first part involved waiting in the car-line to drop Jessie off. She liked being dropped off in the car-line and equated it to being chauffeured around in a limo where I was her driver and her brother was her slave (not butler but *slave*). When we arrived at the curb, she would get out and wave us off, like we were free to go after witnessing her queen's wave. Then she followed it with a sincere goodbye, turned, and ran into the school.

The second part involved parking the car and walking good ol' Sammie Boy to see his speech therapist, Ms. Fox, whose office was housed in a portable building behind the main building. It seemed like most every elementary school in the United States had portable buildings behind them as a form of accommodating an ever-growing population of kids, and alleviating poor planning on the school district's part. I remembered having classes in the same type of portable buildings when I was a kid. That was 35 years ago! Crazy. Anyway, on the way to her portable building--which was the last one

at the very end of a series of twelve portable buildings--Sammie would ask me some interesting questions for a kid.

He always started the questions in the same way. He'd say, "Daddy, can I ask you a question?"

And I would always say, "Sure."

Then he'd lay a question on me like, "Daddy, why do people tell white lies?" Such a simple question without a simple answer.

"That's a good question," I said, putting a hand on Sammie's back to keep him moving toward the portables. If I didn't do that, then he would just stand there, staring at me. I had to keep him moving, keep him on-task as the teachers would say. "People tell white lies so they don't hurt people's feelings."

"But isn't lying bad?"

"Most of the time, it is bad. But sometimes, a white lie is good to tell someone you love so you don't hurt their feelings."

"Why?" he said, as we walked across the same basketball court where we witnessed Selena the counselor just a few days before on the ground with blood pouring out the back of her head. We walked past the spot where she crumpled to the ground and there wasn't any evidence or remnants of what had happened, not a stain on the ground or anything, like it never happened. We didn't stop, though. We had some place to be. We had to stay on-task.

"Let me give you an example," I said.

"OK!"

"Let's say your sister asks you if you like what she's wearing--"

"I *never* like what she's wearing!"

"Hold on now. Let's say she comes out the bedroom and asks you if you like what she's wearing. And let's say she wants your *honest opinion* even though you really don't like what she's wearing. Do you really want to hurt your sister's feelings?"

Then good ol' Sammie Boy stopped in his tracks and tugged at my arm. He had a look on his face, a look of deep sympathy and empathetic pathos, a look I see on his face every once and a while when I know he has connected emotionally to someone or something in a way that he can't explain verbally but certainly understands in his heart. He was serious as all get out. It's true. "Daddy, I was joking when I said 'I *never* like what she's wearing.' I didn't mean that."

"I know, son. But do you understand what I'm saying? Do you want to *hurt* her feelings?"

"No, Daddy. I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"Then you would probably tell her a *white lie*. You would probably tell her you like what she's wearing even though you really don't like what she's wearing. That's telling her a white lie."

"Ohhh! I get it. But I thought all lies were bad?" he said, skeptical again. Something in his little brain just wasn't adding up.

"Well, lies with malicious intent are bad," I said, placing my hand on his back again and gently pushing him forward so we could continue to Ms. Fox's portable. "You know, a person intentionally telling lies for bad reasons is bad. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Daddy."

"Good," I said.

"Last one to Ms. Fox's portable is a rotten egg!" Sammie Boy said, breaking free from me and running a full-on sprint down the sidewalk that snaked through all the portables. "You can't catch me!"

Instead of running after him, I watched him race down that sidewalk, hook a left, and disappear into the group of portables. I slowly walked after him, deliberately keeping my slow pace. When I hooked the same left on the sidewalk, I saw him three buildings down, hooking a right up the wooden ramp that lead to the door to building 9A, the one with Ms. Fox's room in it. At the door, Sammie tapped a syncopated knock with his little fist. He turned to me when he was done, a big smile on his face, and said, "That's our *secret* knock. That's how she knows it's me."

Soon after, the door opened and Ms. Fox--a short, slim woman in her mid-40s with spiky, brown and grey hair and not a lick of makeup on--greeted my son with her thick, German accent, "Goot mornink, Sammie!" In a lot of ways, her and Sammie had the same haircut: unkempt and sticking up all over the place like they had styled their hair with firecrackers and glue. Her tight-fitting, blue t-shirt announced her politics. On the front, it said: Women's Rights are HUMAN RIGHTS! She was a real character.

"Good morning, Ms. Fox!" he said. He ran inside the portable, flung his backpack on a table, and sat down, ready to work. He examined some worksheets waiting for him.

"He's always in a good mood in zee mornink, ready to verk," she said, pleased with his behavior. How could she not be? Most third-graders are absolute terrors at this hour in the morning, just little shits, but not Sammie.

"Yeah, he's a good kid. I'm proud of him." She smiled at me--her way of saying goodbye--and was ready to close the door as I walked out when I realized, I wanted to ask her opinion about my boy. I placed my hand on the door, keeping it from closing, then I said, "Ms. Fox, do you mind if I talk to you for a minute--in *private*?"

She looked a little surprised that I wanted to converse more than just the simple, morning chit-chat. She raised her finger to me, as if to ask me to wait a moment, then she called out to Sammie Boy, "I'm goink to shpeaken to your father for a voment, Sammie. Getten yourself ready, yes?" He shuffled some papers on the table in front of him and grabbed a big, fat, green pencil, scribbling something on the paper, probably his morning assignment. She stepped out of the portable with me, closing the door enough but not quite closed,

jamming the toe of her shoe in between the door and the doorframe so she wouldn't get locked out. Up above, the tangerine sky was draped with curtains of grey and white clouds, cars honking and children laughing in the distance, yet it seemed like we were alone. "How can I helpen you?"

"As you know, Sammie is a special kid."

"Oh, yes! Your son is a fery shpecial boy. A good boy. A hardverkink boy. He is one of my favorite shtudents."

"That's good. That's very good. He never causes you any problems?"

"Your son?!" she said, then bursting into laughter--a deep guttural laugh, her mouth wide, exposing her coffee-stained teeth, one of the top incisors quirkily askew. That comment really cracked her up. I mean, she was cackling all over the goddamn place. She got a real kick out of that too, I could tell, because she cackled a little longer than was comfortable for me, almost as if she was making fun of me, or as if her cackle got away from her. It was weird. After composing herself, straightening her hair and adjusting her t-shirt, she said, "Oh, no, no, no. Your son is an absolute sweetheart. He doesn't haf a *mean bone* in his body. Zat's fery rare and fery shpecial. You know, wiz most of zee shpecial needs children--"

"Yes, yes, I know you have a lot of kids with special needs but I wasn't referring to that with my boy. I mean, he really is *special*. Special--as in exceptional."

"Ah, yes, of course. You are absolutely correct. I agree with you. But vat is it zat you vant to know?"

"Well, I don't want to sound *crazy* but, have you noticed anything unusual about Sammie? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"Hmmm, no. Vell, I don't know vat you mean. Unusual? Can you be more shpecific, yes?" she said, puzzled.

I thought about the recent events with my boy and what he said about his after-school counselor hurting herself and then it came true and the game of *Thump* that he showed Jessie and I how to play and then he went off and guessed every heads or tails without fail until I made him go to bed and I thought that no matter how I explained it to Ms. Fox--rationally, methodically, intellectually, honestly--that she would think I was absolutely crazy to believe that my boy Sammie could see the future. I mean, that just *sounds* crazy, just saying that: my boy Sammie can see the *future*. Sounds crazy, right? I thought so.

Something immediately told me that I shouldn't dare say anything at all. Because here's the thing: once you alert a teacher or a counselor or a therapist or an administrator or an advisor to an issue with your child--or something *different* about them in any way--then it has the potential to become a real problem for the school and the school district. A report has to be made and a committee has to be advised and meetings have to be scheduled and once all of this is set in motion,

it is really hard to stop it. So I decided, right then and there, to keep my damn mouth shut. I just had to. What was I thinking?

"Ummm... I'm really sorry but I forgot that I have an important meeting I have to attend at work. Can I email you more about this later?"

"Uh, yes, zat would be fine," she said, confused, quite baffled actually. I felt bad about that, kind of. I mean, starting this conversation that I initiated then cut short at the drop of a hat. It was pretty rude, now that I think about it. It was very rude. But I had to get out of there.

"I gotta run!" Then I did. Run, that is. I ran my pudgy butt down the ramp to the sidewalk, all the way to the basketball court--past where Selena the after-school counselor bashed her head on the ground--to my car which was across the parking lot and parked at the curb on the street. I jumped in my car (it miraculously started with the first try) and I tore off. I never did send Ms. Fox that email, like I said I would. In fact, I never mentioned anything to her about my boy Sammie's special abilities ever again. Something told me that it was best to keep my mouth shut and I did, if you can believe it. I mean, I have a really hard time keeping my mouth shut. Sometimes, I can just be blabbing and blabbing all over the place. And there is nothing worse than a parent that can't keep his or her mouth shut about their kid and what's so special about them. Blabbing parents are a real pain in the ass.

It's true.

SPEEDY - STOP

BEER, LOTTERY &
CHAPTER THREE

Chapter Three

In some aspects of my life, I consider myself very, very lucky and somewhat successful. In other aspects of my life, I'm a dismal failure. I guess most people could chalk up their life achievements and disappointments in the same binary fashion, but I find myself particularly astute at cataloguing my successes and failures, like a professional bookkeeper organizing the wadded papers and receipts of an idiot savant, who unwittingly became successful at a business endeavor, and collating the idiot's evidence of successful business dealings into a coherent income tax return. I was constantly organizing lists of my luck and misfortunes. Once, I was told by a rather successful acquaintance that if I ever wanted to fulfill my dreams, I had to write down the things I wanted to achieve in life--the things I hoped to gain so I would consider my life a success. In other words, make a list of my *life goals*. I constantly tried to do that but the pessimist in me also had to write down the shitty things that had happened to me, too. I couldn't help myself; any success I hoped to achieve was tempered by the realization that I also thought of myself as an utter, complete failure. What a piece of work I am. Can you imagine the *frustration* I must feel? Of course, you can. Who wouldn't? We're all human. Right?

Here is a list of some of my failures in life:

1. My marriage to my children's mother
2. My career as a writer
3. My repeated attempts to make a hole-in-one in golf
4. My repeated attempts to solve a Rubik's Cube
5. Completing my list of things to achieve to have a successful life

Here is a list of some of my successes in life:

1. My children
2. My trivia skills in music, movies, and popular culture from the 1970s through the 1990s
3. That I'm still alive at age 45
4. That I can still roller-skate at age 45
5. My career as a Network Administrator for the State of Texas

I'm particularly proud of this last one--my career as a Network Administrator for the State of Texas--because I came into this career by pure, dumb *luck*. I mean, it wasn't something I went to school for or had an advanced degree in or had any real training whatsoever in doing. The job of Network Administrator just literally fell in my lap. It was a chance meeting in the hallway as I was walking to the bathroom to take a massive, coffee dump that my career path changed instantly. In a short exchange with a coworker from another department, a half-

truthful statement about my experience working and configuring Windows servers would eventually turn into an opportunity to leave my position as a Help Desk Technician, and move to the Networking Department. How was I to know that the Help Desk would eventually be outsourced to a South Korean company in six, short months? I didn't know that was going to happen when I bullshitted my way through a few easy questions about Windows networking services on the way to the bathroom to release a foul, coffee turd. I couldn't see the future like good ol' Sammie Boy could, not even close. It was pure, *dumb luck* I tell you. It's true.

As I said, before becoming a Network Administrator, I was a Help Desk Technician for the Texas Commission of Employment and Benefits (where I am still employed as said Network Admin) and before that I was a writer who failed miserably (I wrote a novel called *THE RISE AND FALL OF A TITAN* which flopped) and before that I was a Help Desk Technician for a stupid company called TechForce (they were busted by the Feds, I believe, for falsifying test data). Now, I don't need to go into much of this because you can probably Google this stuff about me by searching for my name, Simon Burchwood. That's right, *the Simon Burchwood*. None of our lives are private anymore. Everything about all of us is just a few, simple keystrokes away from an invasion of our privacy. But it's all out there; go see for yourself. I had dreams of becoming a famous writer but those dreams never came to be. Maybe it'll happen for me at another place and time in my life. Hopefully, this is something that good ol' Sammie Boy will see in our *future*. That would be nice, huh?

When I was younger and really trying my best to be a famous writer, I was so angry at life. I was seething with rage--on the inside. I don't know why, I just was. I don't know what I was so angry about. I mean, I was mad at everyone and *everything*. It was like my thoughts had Tourette's Syndrome, what, with the cursing and the raging and the judging and the complete hypocrisy. Working as a Help Desk Tech probably didn't help either. You have to be a goddamn masochist to work as a Help Desk Tech because they are constantly being yelled at by morons who don't have the patience to just read the goddamn manual! I'm getting hot under the collar just thinking about it: the morons on the helpline. Dealing with these morons gives you an unvarnished look at humanity. It's really a shame, I'm telling you.

Anyway, when the opportunity presented itself to transfer to the Networking Department, I took it even though I didn't know jack-shit about networking, not really. I mean, I knew enough to bullshit my way through a spur-of-the-moment hallway conversation about IP addresses and data packets and how to sniff them on the network and sockets about some-such and shit like that. See? I sound like I know what I'm talking about, right? I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to become a State of Texas employee: a state worker. When I worked

at the Help Desk, I was only a contractor. But working for the Network Department, that was the real deal--a permanent, full-time, salaried position with benefits and holidays and sick days--the works! I took the position for the stability, for my kids. I always wanted to be a good dad and this was one way I could do it, by being a good provider and having a stable job. Believe me, having a stable job is one of the best things you can do for your kids. It's true.

As I was saying, the opportunity presented itself during a brief encounter in a hallway of the Texas Commission of Employment and Benefits as I was on the way to the bathroom. Earlier that morning, I drank three, possibly four, cups of extremely strong coffee and my colon was spearheading a gastrointestinal revolt. I was attempting to reach my favorite toilet stall before I shit my pants when I was greeted in the hallway by a fella named Larry Healy. Larry was the Network Department Manager and a pretty jovial dude with bright, white teeth behind a sincere, Southern smile--his hair was also gelled and his shirt pressed and his pants creased and his shoes shined and he even wore suspenders sometimes(!)--and it never failed that he always wanted to say 'Hi' to me and ask me how I was doing or how work was going, even though I didn't *know* him particularly well. When his eyes locked in with mine, I clinched my butt cheeks to repel the gastral revolt and commenced with a polite conversation of small-talk without crapping my pants.

He extended his hand to mine and said, "Hey there! How's it hanging? Working hard?"

"Oh yes. Yes!" I said, the coffee in my gut churning and grumbling. "Always busy." I really needed to take a shit. Bad! But I was trapped.

"That's too bad the Help Desk will be outsourced soon."

"What?" I said, shocked. This was news to me. "Outsourced? What do you mean?"

"Oh, boy," he said, straightening his tie as if to seal up a hole in the side of his neck which leaked this secret information. Isn't it funny how sometimes people do that? That distraction thing when they say something they shouldn't? Well, I think he said something he shouldn't have. "I guess I wasn't supposed to say anything about that... yet."

"Is the Help Desk really being outsourced? When?"

"I don't know for sure," he said, looking around as if he realized he spilled the beans about something that wasn't supposed to be spilled. Working for the government can make some people really paranoid. It's true. "But it will happen eventually, I guarantee it."

"That sucks."

"Tell me about it."

"I guess I would have to look for another job," I said, exhaling a sigh as heavy as a ton of bricks. My heart just sank. The idea of looking

for another job was about as nice as the idea pulling my own fingernails off with needle nose pliers--slow and painful and infuriating.

"Another job, huh? Do you know anything about networking? We have a position opening soon."

"Really?" I said, excited, hopeful. I never, ever thought about a career in computer networking but it sounded much better than being unemployed. Considering I worked for the Texas Commission of Employment and Benefits, I knew how precarious a few months of unemployment would be for me.

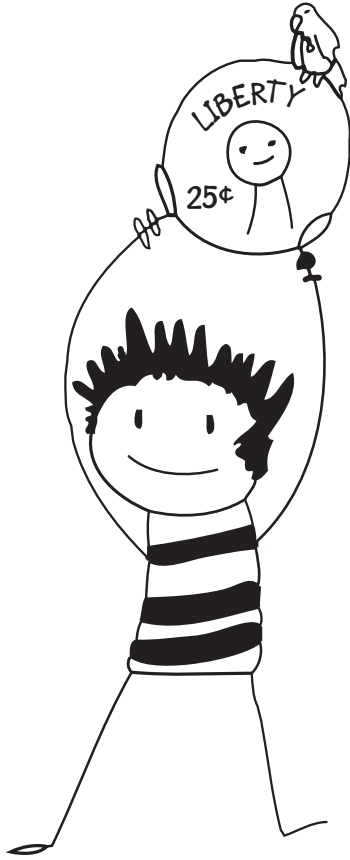
"Do you have any experience with networking?" he said. And without blinking an eye, I rattled off this and that about whatever popped in my mind about networking computers, buzz words and keywords and technical jargon and whatever. I must have made some kind of sense because he didn't look at me like I was talking out of my ass--which was good--except that I *was* talking out of my ass. But sometimes, that's what you have to do to survive: think on your feet and talk out your ass. It took him a second to process the litany of terms I rattled off then he said, "Well, get your resume in order and start filling out a State app. I'll let you know the day before the position posts so you can get it in right away. I find it's better to hire from within than from the outside. Too many unknown variables from the outside. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, I get it. Let me know. I'm very interested."

"You got it, pardner!" he said, slapping me on the shoulder then walking away, whistling. Little did he know I was on the brink of soiling my pants. I ran all the way to my favorite toilet stall, my right-hand securing my backside as I ran. Fortunately for me, I made it to the toilet on time.

A couple of weeks later, Mr. Healy did inform me about the position and I did apply for it. A week after I submitted my resume and State app, I was interviewed for the position. And a few weeks after that, I accepted the job offer of Network Specialist II, a position that started at \$34,521 per year with a full benefits package. To me, that was all the money and stability in the world. And it was all pure, *dumb luck*. Nothing more. It's true.

I wish I had the ability to see the future just like good ol' Sammie Boy. I mean, I tried to do the right thing. I tried to make the right choices that affected my future in the right ways but it didn't always work out that way. Mostly, it seemed to me, luck was either on my side or it wasn't. Little did I know that my fortune was about to change.



On the nights when little Jessie had taekwondo practice, Sammie Boy and I didn't have anything else to do. Initially when Jessie started, it was fun watching her kick the other little boys' asses. She was rather talented at taekwondo early on and her instructor, Master Lu, saw this in her, moving her up the color-scheme of mastery rather quickly--white to yellow to green to blue to red to black with red stripes. Jessie was a black belt with red stripes, which meant she was pretty much as good and as talented as a full black belt. But because of her young age and lack of maturity, Master Lu felt holding her at the black with red stripes level was best even though she would demolish any other kid her age and up to a few years older, too--boys or girls. She kicked *any* kid's ass. Like I said, although this was fun at first to watch, the monotony of witnessing her mastery of everyone became somewhat... boring. I noticed that Sammie Boy and I were sighing with boredom while watching little Jessie kick and punch the other brats to the mat. An ugly glance from a defeated turd's mother was enough for me. I decided then and there that Sammie and I would spend our time outside the dojang--the Korean term for the taekwondo training hall--doing much more fun things than receiving dirty looks from the mothers of the punk-ass bitches getting their asses beat by my daughter.

The dojang resided in an L-shaped strip mall across the street from Wells Port Elementary, where my kids went to school. Neighboring the dojang were a variety of local businesses--a family-owned Italian restaurant, an insurance broker, a hair salon, a nail salon, a coffee shop, a Mexican restaurant, an African-American church, a ballet studio, a Mediterranean restaurant / pizza joint, and a convenience store. The owners of the businesses were a menagerie of different cultural backgrounds and personalities. For instance, the nail salon was owned by a group of Vietnamese ladies, none of whom spoke English except for one: the youngest daughter. It seems most nail salons are owned by a similar group of Vietnamese mothers, aunts, cousins, and daughters. On the other hand, the Italian restaurant was owned by a couple who were not Italian at all but were, in fact, generic white people with a Czech background who were originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota. One time, when I was waiting for a take-out pizza that I ordered from them, I asked the wife--her name was Mabel-- why it was that they owned an Italian restaurant yet they didn't come from Italian heritage. And she said to me, with a big smile on her face, "We just like to eat Italian food so we figured we could own a restaurant serving Italian food." Well, duh. That made sense to me. Makes sense to you, right? Of course, it does.

So one night, after watching yet another brutal ass-kicking by Jessie, destroying all the little shits in her class, Sammie Boy and I decided to wander around the strip mall and check things out. He wanted to have father/son time. As we walked out of the dojang, good ol' Sammie Boy slammed the door behind us, rattling the windows around the glass and steel door. I thought for a moment that the glass was going to shatter because he slammed the door so hard. My first instinct was to scold him for slamming the door but, after seeing the cute expression on his face--his hands over his mouth in a *Little Rascals* fashion as if to say 'oopsie!--I didn't scold him. I just let it go.

"Want to get some ice cream?" I said, holding out my hand for him to grasp.

"You mean, you're not mad at me for slamming the door?"

"Nah. Want ice cream?"

"Yes!" he said, holding my hand. He held three of my fingers tightly; three fingers were all his little hand could grip. We walked past the ballet studio (which was empty) and the African-American church (which seemed full because we could hear people singing hymns loudly inside but couldn't see anybody through the tinted windows) and the nail salon (which was full of ladies and girls yakking about stuff) and the Mediterranean restaurant (also completely empty) to the convenience store. It was called Speedy-Stop. The letters of the sign above the entrance were a bright, illuminated maroon and also the home to a family of finches--the twigs and paper scraps of their nest protruding haphazardly from the "o" in the word "Stop."

Looking at the nest as we went inside the store, Sammie said, "I wonder if those birds like living above the Speedy-Stop?"

"They wouldn't have gone through the trouble if they didn't," I said.

"Speaking of birds, Daddy. Can I still get a budgerigar?"

"What kind of ice cream do you want?" I said, pushing him gently through the door and, rather stealthily, interrupting his pet-themed train of thought.

Inside, the Speedy-Stop's aroma was obnoxious--a combination of bleach, dust, coffee brewed from the early morning hours, hot dogs roasting since 10:30am, and the smoke from Nag Champa incense sticks wafting near the cash register--yet we were kindly greeted by Himanshu, one of the owners and the cashier for the night, who was oblivious to the unusual combination of smells. He smiled a wide, bright white, toothy smile. His pitch-black hair was combed to the side and his light blue, short-sleeved, button down shirt was stained from dingy-brown hot dog water. His nose hairs were so long that it seemed like he had a Hitler-style moustache, one of those stumpy, square 'staches. It was hard *not* to stare at his nose hairs. It's true.

"Hal-oh!" he said, boisterous and pleasant. He winked at good ol' Sammie Boy. Sammie waved back.

"Hey, man," I said. "How's it going?"

"It is going! Two pack Marlboro for the price of one today," he said, pointing his thumb at the massive cigarette display behind him, a mosaic wall of a hundred tobacco brands. The cash register was entombed in cigarette boxes and cigarillo packs and chewing tobacco and electronic cigarette contraptions and their nicotine oils as well as condoms, sexual enhancement "herbal" pills, stale Moon Pies, and a plastic dish filled with dusty pennies and colored paper clips. His smile stretched a little wider until he noticed my eyes darting in the direction of Sammie then back, me quickly waving both hands in a 'No, no, no, no, no, not now!' fashion, until he got my point. His smile vanished and a serene look replaced it, a venerable look of acceptance and content. "Wrong customer. I confuse you with Tom, the accountant. You all look the same. So sorry!"

"No problem," I said, winking at him. Sammie, fortunately, didn't catch any of our awkward exchange. He was too concerned with what he was looking for, which was: ice cream! He beelined for the ice cream cooler, then he slid the glass lid open-wide. As he leaned into the freezer case--images of ice cream sandwiches and popsicles and ice cream cones and all on the side of it--his little feet raised off the ground, dangling a bit as he wiggled his way over the lip of the cooler. He knew what he was looking for and rifled through the other frozen treats he didn't want--bomb pops, push-ups, chocolate chip cookie ice cream sandwiches, Neapolitan ice cream sandwiches, Klondike bars, any frozen treat coated in nuts like Drumsticks--until he found what he wanted, a cup of Blue Bell homemade vanilla ice cream. He was a simple kid with simple taste. In the box with the other ice cream cups was a bundle of paper-wrapped, wooden spoons. He grabbed one of those, too, then popped out of the cooler, landing on his feet and sliding the freezer lid closed in one motion that looked too difficult for a man my age to do. I admired his agility like I was admiring a ninja--an ice cream ninja!

"Daddy, can I get this one?!" he said, a big smile on his face, his cheeks flush from the cold air inside the freezer.

"Of course. Where do you want to eat it?" I said, rummaging through my pant pocket for my wallet.

"Outside in the grass!"

"Sounds good. Do you want a bottle of water, too?"

As soon as I finished asking that rhetorical question, something caught Sammie's attention. He craned his head around my waist to see what was behind me, then bolted for the cash counter. He jumped up and down, one of his hands gripping the counter, the other pointing to a plastic, clear, display case of lottery scratch tickets. He was so excited, it looked like his little head was going to explode. His face was all shades of red and the veins in his little head were popping out all over the place and spit was flying out his mouth and his hair was going

here and there. It was a crazy sight to see, good ol' Sammie Boy losing his mind like that. I thought something may have been wrong with him but he was just being him, all excited and delirious. It's true.

As he jumped up and down, jabbing his little index finger at the plastic case, he said, "Daddy! Daddy! Looky! Buy that one, the one with the smiley face on it! Buy it! BUY IT! YOU'LL WIN, I SWEAR!"

I examined the earnestness of his red face then looked at the scratch ticket then back at Sammie. He was going nuts! I took a better look at the scratch ticket, which was called *Smiley Face Match*, with a cartoon picture of a smiley face emoticon or emoji or whatever you call them on the front of it, next to its \$1 price tag and its \$5,000 grand prize emblazoned on it with a red starburst and a fancy serif font. I felt my intuition ball up into a knot in my stomach, a nagging pull that I usually paid attention to if I was smart enough. I was skeptical that I had the luck to win \$5,000. Who wins money with those lottery tickets anyway? Nobody, that's who. Lottery tickets were a scam to cheat poor people out of their money.

"Really, Sammie?" I said, setting the vanilla ice cream cup and wooden spoon on the counter. I glanced at Himanshu and he nodded knowingly, his toothy grin as white as ever, his nose-hair moustache perched above his upper lip like a bird's nest.

"We haven't had a big winner on that game yet. Today it could be you," he said, moving closer to the plastic display, extending a hand, ready to rip the next ticket from the roll.

"Daddy, I swear. On my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye! You'll win!"

Feeling a smile push through my skepticism, I nodded to my boy, then looked at Himanshu and said, "I'll take one of those scratch tickets."

"The one with the smiley face?" Himanshu said.

"Yes. And the ice cream, too." I reached into my pocket for my wallet and Himanshu pinched one of the smiley face scratch tickets--bending it up and down to weaken the serrated edge of the ticket to make it easier to tear--when Sammie Boy started screaming out.

"Not that one!" he said, putting the tip of his index finger on the plastic display, the soft tissue at the end of his finger smashing against the clear plastic. "That one, RIGHT THERE!"

"Sammie," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder, constraining his excitement. "That one is kinda *way* in there. He has one ready to tear off. Does it have to be that specific one?"

"Yes, Daddy! THAT ONE!"

I looked at Himanshu, totally expecting him to back me up, and describe to Sammie the colossal pain in the ass it would be to unravel the entire roll to get that one specific ticket out. It couldn't have been allowed in the state lottery procedures to pull tickets out of order. Right? That seemed right.

But he didn't do that at all. He nodded, smiled some more with his goddamn, super-shiny white teeth and his ebony bird's nest 'stache, then said, "I can get you that *one*. Is that the one your dad should get?" he said, winking at Sammie. Sammie smiled back, thankful that Himanshu was his ally. Himanshu then pulled the strip of tickets out of the display (maybe ten of them), folding them at their serrated edges, into a neat stack, until he reached the specific one that Sammie wanted. He tore it free from the other tickets, then he shoved the neat stack back into the display, cramming them in a slot not quite tall enough for the stack of discarded tickets. He rang up the ice cream and the scratch ticket, told me the total, and said, "Good luck. \$1.75."

"Thank you," I said, giving him two dollar bills then refusing the change. "Keep it."

I gave Sammie the ice cream cup and placed my hand on his shoulder, leading him outside of the Speedy-Stop. To our left, a grassy lawn stretched between the Speedy-Stop and the street. Along the side of the store was a narrow walkway with a cinder block edge. We found a place to sit. Sammie tore the lid off the ice cream cup--like a cast-away on a deserted island finding a can of food after a week without any nourishment--and tossed the lid in the grass. I examined the scratch ticket, the smiley face on the front inviting me to scratch its face off, the odds of winning a prize on the back. I leaned back a bit on my butt and shoved my hand in my front pocket, looking for a coin to scratch with. I couldn't find one.

"Lottery tickets are a voluntary tax on the poor," I said to Sammie. He had the cup close to his face, shoveling little white mounds of ice cream into his little mouth.

"We're not *poor*," he said, shoveling some more.

"That's not what I mean. Besides, the odds of us winning \$5,000 are astronomical," I said. "I don't have a quarter to scratch it with."

"I have one," Sammie said, pulling a quarter from his pocket.

"Is this the quarter from the other night?"

"Yes, it's my lucky quarter."

I placed the ticket on my knee and scratched the front of it, Sammie looking on with ice cream dribbling out the side of his mouth down his chin, silver dust coming off the ticket and falling into the grass like shimmery angel's dust. After the entire play area was free of its silvery covering, I examined the exposed numbers, reading the instructions on the front of the game, and examining the numbers again. It was clear we won.

"Did we win?!" Sammie said, looking at me for a confirmation.

"Yes, looks like you were right. We won \$50."

"\$50?!" he said, jumping to his feet, throwing the empty ice cream cup into the air. "THAT'S A LOT OF MONEY!" In the grass, he danced a little jig, a dance only a boy Sammie's age could pull off without looking like he was insane. He was as excited as can be.

I was astonished. Even though it was only \$50, I was certain now that my boy, good ol' Sammie Boy, could see the future. Our future. Maybe a brighter future. Or a darker one. Either way, he could see things I could only dream of seeing. How could he do that? Where did this ability come from?

"Will I win more if I go back in and buy more?" I said, curious.

He stopped dancing and looked at me, examining the look on my face, then looked down at the grass. It was amazing how quickly his excitement curdled into embarrassment then abashment.

"Would you be mad at me if I told you I didn't know?"

"No, of course not. But how did you know I was going to win this time?"

Sammie kept his head down, using the tip of his shoe to carve an "S" in the grass.

"I don't know."

"Sammie?"

"Yes?" I knew I was creating an environment where my boy would clam up and not talk to me. A few years before, I learned that these types of interrogations led to a self-imposed week of solitary confinement, where Sammie Boy would cram himself under his bed and not come out nor talk to me. I didn't want that to happen again and decided this seeing-the-future business was too important to risk him clamming up. So I decided to back off, for a while at least, and just not talk about it anymore.

"Will you tell me later if I stop talking about it now?"

Sammie slowly raised his head, his eyes leading the way, and nodded.

"Yes, I will."

"Promise?" I said, extending my pinky finger to him for a pinky swear. He confirmed by wrapping his little pinky around my pinky, tugging it.

"Promise! Shmomise!" His sly smile reappeared.

"Thank you, son. Let's go see who your sister has beaten up. OK?"

"OK!"

I placed my hand on his shoulder and we cashed our winning ticket together in the Speedy-Stop. Himanshu congratulated us. Then we walked back to the taekwondo dojang to see how many asses Jessie had kicked while we were gone.

As a boy, I absolutely LOVED comic books, particularly Marvel Comics, and I would devour them for hours--by myself, in my room. I loved the entirety of the Marvel Universe, all the heroes and all the villains--well, most all of them. Marvel Comics weren't perfect. They

shit out a few turds here and there. I mean, the band *KISS* as superheroes? What a pile of shit! But a lot of what they published was pure gold. And my favorite was *The Amazing Spider-Man*. I loved Spider-Man and everything about Spider-Man. I collected Marvel Comics as a boy and cherished all the issues I had of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, so much so that I still had my collection as an adult. I had retained the entirety of my collection through ups and downs in my life, through thick and thin, as the value of my collection skyrocketed into the stratosphere. I had every issue from #10 - #316, all the Annuals, the One-offs, the Specials, the What-Ifs, all of them, except #1 - #9 and *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Spidey's first appearance and an issue that is worth a gazillion dollars). For a brief time as a boy, I did own a copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #6 in fair condition, which isn't great but better than nothing. It disappeared after my friend Stanford--one of the few black friends I had at school when I lived in Montgomery, Alabama during my junior high years--came to my house to eat dinner one day after school. I confronted him about it the next day at school but he denied taking it. He denied it again years later when I confronted him about it during a trip to Montgomery on my way to New York for a book signing that went horribly wrong (I'll tell you about that later). I know the bastard took it, though. It had to have been him the way he drooled over it in my room, the thieving bastard. It's true.

Anyway, except for *The Amazing Spider-Man* #6 (I'm telling you, I know that bastard Stanford stole it. I know it!), I still had the rest of the issues in a long-box in my closet in my bedroom, each one carefully enclosed in a 2-millimeter thick, archival, polyester mylar bag with an acid-free cardboard insert to keep them straight and protected. Only a serious comic book collector would go to these lengths to protect their collection and I did it, too. To be honest, I initially was saving them as an investment and a way to keep a connection to my childhood and my love for comic books. But when I became a dad, my collection and my love for comic books was something I wanted to share with my boy, Sammie. It was something I hoped would bridge my childhood with his, something that I felt we could share and discuss together. And, man, was I right. Good ol' Sammie Boy was probably a bigger fanboy than I was. Really.

I remember the day I first showed him my collection of comic books. It was a day I will never, *ever* forget. We were still in our old house--the house we lived in before I divorced Sammie's mother and before she died--and I had come across my comic book collection while I was in my closet, thinking about packing and moving all the shit I had amassed while I was married. It was a soul-crushing realization that I would soon be moving out of the house that I swore I would never leave. As I sat on the carpeted floor--sobbing--I saw the corner of the white, long box full of comic books protruding out from

behind a row of hanging blue jeans. I wiped my wet eyes and snotty nose on the short-sleeve of my t-shirt then pulled out the heavy box. Sliding on the carpet, I forgot just how heavy a long box full of comic books was; it must have weighed 100 pounds. I placed my legs on each side of the box, pulling it close to my crotch, sitting up straight, lifting the lid off carefully, and placing it to the side. The box was jammed full of comic books, the mylar bags glistening under the yellow glow of the closet light.

I randomly pulled one from the middle of the box (issue #156) and found myself transported back to the time I first saw that cover, the one that announced, "INTRODUCING: The most mind-boggling wedding guest of them all--the murderous MIRAGE!" The wedding scene depicted Spider-Man web-slinging from out of nowhere into a wedding party, their faces looking on in horror as Spidey navigated toward one of many replicas of the multiplying villain Mirage, Spidey's webbed fist punching through the mirage of the evil man, another word-bubble proclaiming, "AT LAST! The long-awaited WEDDING of Betty Brant and Ned Leeds!" I didn't remember ever caring if Betty Brant and Ned Leeds got married (What young boy cares about weddings anyway?!) but I do remember seeing Mirage for the first time and thinking, 'I wonder what this dumbass thinks he can do to beat Spider-Man that all of the other *shitheads* couldn't do!' I was, no doubt, intrigued; I still felt the intrigue as an adult looking at the cover again. I couldn't remember the outcome of the battle between Spider-Man and Mirage. I only remembered the feeling of excitement of just *looking* at the cover. I was a real sad-sack for sure, sitting on my closet floor, going from bawling like a baby to reminiscing with old comic books, when good ol' Sammie Boy discovered me in my closet. I felt his little hands on my shoulders and the warmth of his sweet breath on my neck, the weight of his body resting on my tired back.

"Wha cha doing, Daddy?" he said, leaning in to see the cover of The Amazing Spider-Man #156 comic book I held in my hands, protected by a clear, mylar bag.

"Looking at my comic book collection," I said.

"Comic books? Where?!" he said, tossing himself next to me on the carpet, propped up on his knees with an excitement he could barely contain. Who *doesn't* get excited about comic books? A no-fun jerk-wad, that's who. But my boy Sammie wasn't a no-fun jerk-wad. He was so excited he could hardly contain himself. It's true.

"Here, in this box," I said, placing my hand on the side of the long-box. "It's a collection I started when I was about your age. I've kept them this whole time."

"I didn't know you had comic books in here. Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Because I wanted to wait until you were old enough to appreciate them."

"Old enough?" he said, releasing an annoyed *harrumph*. "Old enough, shmold enough!"

"Oh shmeally?" I said, leaning forward, looking him in his eyes.

"Shmeally!"

I knew Sammie was serious about the comic books when a terse sincerity appeared on his little cute face and our Shmenglish conversation quickly turned back to boring ol' regular English.

"Can I look at them?" he said. "I promise to be careful."

"You promise?" I said.

"I promise!"

I nodded then he lunged for the comics, jabbing his fingers into the crammed-tight box. I gently placed my hand on his shoulder. He stopped to look at me and I gave him a knowing nod, as if to say, 'Please be careful.' He continued with gentle hands. He flipped through several before landing on a thick issue towards the back. He pulled it up to reveal the issue, 'The Amazing Spider-Man Annual #2.' Now, annual issues came out once a year--hence, they were called *Annals*--and they usually had a retrospective section of things that came about in issues the year before like villains that were introduced or milestones that were achieved or characters that died and shit like that. They also contained bizarre stories that were too far-fetched for regular issues. The Amazing Spider-Man Annual #2 was no different.

"What about this one?" he said, holding the issue up closer to my face. It's bright, yellow cover obnoxiously glared through the clear plastic mylar bag. "What's this one about?"

"I don't know. Read the cover to me."

He lowered the comic book to his lap and stared at the cover, examining it. Spider-Man stood alone with nothing around him--no scenery, no villains lunging for him, no girlfriend fawning over him or his newspaper boss barking at him, no aunt begging him to be good, nothing--but the bright, yellow background and little, miniature versions of himself in various spidey poses as well as a large spidey head, floating in the middle with the mini Spider-men orbiting around it. Right beneath *The Amazing Spider-Man* title was a black banner with bold, red letters which called out: ALL NEW! "THE WONDROUS WORLDS OF DR. STRANGE!" Sammie read this banner out loud the best he could in his third-grade level reading voice, all stops and stutters and restarts. He really tried his best to sound like he knew what he was reading.

"Daddy, who is Dr. Strange?" he said, pointing at the black banner. "Is he the bad guy in this one?"

"No, Dr. Strange is a good guy. He's kind of like a wizard or a sorcerer. This is his first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man*."

"What's a sorcer--sorcer--sore--sir--err?"

"A sorcerer is someone who can conjure spells and travel to other dimensions."

"You mean, he's like a magician?" he said, scratching his head.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that, but real magic, not fake magic, like performing tricks or something. Dr. Strange is the sorcerer supreme in the Marvel Universe, the most powerful of all sorcerers. He protects the Earth against magical and mystical threats. Pretty cool."

"Wow! Can I read this one?"

"Sure, but we have to read it here together. We need to be careful with it. OK?"

"OK!"

I pulled good ol' Sammie Boy onto my lap and, together, we slid the comic book out of its clear mylar bag and began to read it. The story began with a bizarre looking character named Xandu, an evil sorcerer who possessed one half of a magic wand called "The Wand of Watoomb." He devised a plan to retrieve the other half of the "The Wand of Watoomb" from his nemesis Dr. Strange by hypnotizing two thugs and ordering them to beat-up Dr. Strange and return to Xandu with the other half of the wand. It was a whacky premise that even Sammie could see through.

"Daddy, why doesn't Xandu just fight Dr. Strange for the other half of the wand *himself*?"

"That would be too easy, now wouldn't it?"

"And where's Spider-Man?"

"He's coming. Hold on!"

The two hypnotized thugs entered Dr. Strange's lair and overpowered him, stealing his half of "The Wand of Watoomb." As they escaped to the roof of the building, Spider-Man spotted them while he swung around New York City, looking for something to do, good deeds and shit like that. Spidey approached them but they overcame him too, their spell-bound minds and bodies not tiring during their battle with the webslinger. Spidey gave up, knowing that they had the upper hand, but tagged them with a tracking device as they escaped.

"Spider-Man can find them using the tracker thingy, Daddy?"

"Yes, Spider-Man is pretty ingenious, isn't he?"

Anyway, Spider-Man tracked the thugs with his tracking device and Dr. Strange followed Spider-Man with his mystical abilities. The two heroes teamed up to defeat Xandu and Dr. Strange, with his magic powers and heroic wisdom, decided to erase the memory of what just transpired from Xandu's mind, as well as any evil ambitions he had, leaving him to wander the Earth as a mere mortal.

Then Dr. Strange grabbed "The Wand of Watoomb" and declared, "I realize now that the Wand of Watoomb is too potent, too menacing to ever fall into other hands! And so, my Mystical Amulet will drain every bit of power out of it, until all that remains is a harmless, simple ornament! The threat of Watoomb exists no more!" And with that, the powers of the wand were absorbed by an amulet around Dr. Strange's neck, and the powers of the wand became the powers of Dr. Strange.

"So Dr. Strange can now travel to other dimensions and see the future?!"

"Yes, whatever powers the wand had are now his powers. They are a part of him now, through his Mystical Amulet."

"Cool!" said good ol' Sammie Boy, jumping to his feet and assuming a super hero pose. "Daddy, can I dress up as Dr. Strange next Halloween?"

I could see on Sammie's face that the idea of dressing up as Dr. Strange was a fantastical idea and I couldn't agree more, as long as he didn't want me to dress up as Spider-Man. I wasn't about to stuff my pudgy butt inside a skin-tight Spider-Man costume. I smiled at him and said, "Sure, son. Whatever you want."

"Yeah!" he said, raising a hand above his head, his arm outstretched at full-extension, his index finger pointing to the heavens. "By the powers of my Mystical Amulet, time to disappear into the future!" Then he ran at full-speed out of the closet to a different part of the house, probably to the kitchen to get a Popsicle or something.

