

Bring it Back Again

Or

It's Not Wrong to Want to be Happy

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Bring it Back Again press

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Prologue

Now this story isn't really about music, but I mention it because for a lot of people, music defines an age. Heavy Metal and Punk Rock were popular, along with a new kind of music called New Wave. Disco was dead, may it rest in peace, and believe it or not, Rockabilly was popular again. Rap was coming into being but it wasn't that big yet, and Michael Jackson was the king of pop.

Many people called it the "Decade of Decadence," not just for the styles but for everything. America had finally come out of the post-Vietnam recession, and maybe was trying to get some of its innocents back, even if it was just window dressing. For a lot of people things weren't good, but for a lot of people things were good, and for one family called the Morgans, it was really good.

Clark Morgan was an unassuming 40-something year old man. He was somewhat more noticeable than some only because of his Greek statue-like face, dirty blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He was handsome. But he dressed modestly, talked modestly, and for most of his life, lived modestly. Until now the greatest job he ever had--best paying anyway--was fighting the Communists in the jungles of Vietnam, something he'd rather not remember. But somewhere along the line a great awareness blossomed in him. He got a job as a salesman while he went back to school. He soon got a degree--only a two-year degree, but it was enough to get him a job at a company that helped make computers, of all things.

Clark had a wife, about 40 years old, for about 20 years, and five children, if you can believe it. Until recently they lived in a one-bedroom trailer in a town named Oilville in the Republic of California. Clark and his family were part of a group of people often called the Okies. Like most of the Californian Okies, his parents and grandparents, as well as his wife's, came to California to escape the Dustbowl and probably a lot of other stuff, too. Of course, not all Okies were from Oklahoma. Clark's parents and grandparents were from Missouri. Before that his ancestors lived in Wales and immigrated to America in the 1600s. The Morgans liked to say that they were related to Founding Father Daniel Morgan and the pirate that conquered Panama, Henry Morgan.

Now maybe they were related to those guys and maybe they weren't; in fact, all of that stuff wasn't really important. I only mention it 'cause the Morgans loved their family. They were proud of their heritage; they were proud of who they were, what they were, and where they came from. Now that's important.

With his new job Clark Morgan moved his family out of that trailer, out of Oilville and into a town called Los Fronteriza--still in California, if you're wondering. They bought a ranch house with four bedrooms. And that's where they spent the greatest years of their lives.

Chapter 1

Clark opened the door and the two youngest brothers ran in, rapidly inspecting every room, and the two teenagers did so at a more moderate pace. Shere Khan, the pit bull, waddled through the door and sat next to the wall, content to watch his humans like a TV show.

Sharon only stood in the living room holding her hands together, blushing like a school girl and swaying back and forth. She might have swayed like that for hours if Clark hadn't gone to the wall and turned a dial.

As Sharon heard a low hum echo through the house, she smiled and knelt down over a vent in the floor next to the wall. Her hair flew in the air like the tentacles of a black octopus and for the first time in her life, in her own home, in the summer time, the beads of sweat that had always been on her face since she was a little girl stopped. Stopped cold, literally.

'Oooohhhh,' she said in the long, lilting voice she was known for. 'Clark, it's incredible.' The kitchen and living room were really the same room, separated only by a bar or an island or something. On the kitchen side was a screen door leading to the garage. On the living room side was a hallway that led to a closet, a bathroom, and four bedrooms, all in that order. 'I feel like I'm married to Pablo Escobar,' Sharon said. Clark only smiled.

The kids came back into the living room.

'Gadzooks, Dad! Do all four of us get our own room?' said Danny.

'Of course not,' Clark responded. 'Your mother and I get one, of course.'

'Can I have the one on the end?' said Enos.

'No way, dork!' said Susanna. 'That one's mine!' She punched her brother in the shoulder, almost knocking him down, and Susanna was holding back.

'But Dad, it's the only one with a grounded outlet, and I want to get a computer!' Enos shouted. Susanna grabbed Enos by the ears and was about to throw him across the room, but her father interrupted.

'It doesn't matter!' said Clark. 'None of you can have a computer or TV in your room. You do that and you're just going to stay in there all God damn day!'

'OK,' Clark continued, 'first of all, Susanna gets her own room 'cause she's the only girl.' Susanna folded her arms, looked at Enos and raised her eyebrows. She did it every time she won, and she won a lot. 'So the last two rooms are divided between you three boys.'

Enos shouted, 'So one of us gets our own room!?'

'Just until Calvin comes home,' said Clark. 'Sharon, why don't you decide?'

Sharon smiled. She pointed at the boys and spoke. 'Bubblegum, bubblegum in a dish, how many pieces do you wish?' She stopped on Leroy.

Leroy froze. 'Uh... uh... uh...' he said.

'Pick a number, you moron!' his sister said.

'Uh... uh... uh,' Leroy could only mutter again.

'FOUR!' Susanna yelled.

'Four,' Leroy said softly.

'One, two, three...' Sharon continued with all that other bullshit, until she rested on Leroy again. 'Uh, I guess it's you... or something,' Sharon said to Leroy.

'Me?' said Leroy. He hardly won anything. Sharon kissed him on the cheek playfully.

'Wait a minute,' cried Enos, 'you didn't even... I wasn't in...' he struggled for words, 'you never rested your finger on me; you only went back and forth between Danny and Leroy.' He was right.

'Oh, I did not.' She was wrong. Sharon didn't even notice what she had done, and hell, she didn't even care.

'Look,' said Clark, as Sharon lit up a cigarette, 'this is just as well. It's better to have the two younger boys in a room, and when Calvin comes back, we'll have the two older boys in a room.'

'So there,' said Sharon, sticking out her tongue at Enos.

'Now look guys,' said Clark. 'Are we gonna fill this house up, or are we gonna sleep on the floor tonight?'

And like that, the family went out into the moving van and started fillin' that house up. It really didn't seem like work at first. It was like they were building their new life. Deciding what went where and seeing those empty, white box-like rooms fill up with their familiar possessions gave them a weird kind of satisfaction.

But after a while they didn't seem so enthusiastic. Sharon was the first to stop working, then it was Danny, then it was Enos. Clark put a stop to that. He couldn't really make Sharon do what he wanted, 'cause what the hell could he do? But he put those kids to work. When the moving van was empty, Clark took Leroy and Enos and drove off and returned with the van late that night, just as full as before. And the next day Clark and the kids got to work again.

Soon it wasn't long before that house was filled, and I mean filled, with old lamps, tables, wire spools, old chairs, old couches, and two TVs, one with the screen busted open. If he could have brought that pickup truck, he probably would have, but it hadn't run since Pat Brown was in office and he really couldn't fit it in the van, of course. But in front of their new pretty ranch house, along with the junk that was too dirty to put in the house, Clark put a big old ugly brown couch, with springs poking out of it.

The rest of the family wouldn't sit outside on that couch. They all gave their own reasons. But Clark, like the stubborn son of a bitch he was, sat on that awful thing every evening while he drank his beer.

No one had the courage to say anything, until one night at the dinner table Susanna, the smart ass that she was, opened her mouth and said, 'So Dad, when are we going to bring home Fred Sanford and Lamont?' Sharon

and Enos started laughing, Leroy smiled, and Danny started laughing too, even though he really didn't understand the joke.

Clark put down his fork on his mashed potatoes and gave Susana a look. Now it's hard to explain why, but with no words, no actions, no nothing-with just a look, Clark could control everything that girl said, did and thought, and I mean everything. And while the rest of the family was still giggling from her joke, she turned as serious as a Sgt. Friday and as sober as a Mormon on Sunday.

She opened her mouth and said, 'I'm sorry, Dad.' And she meant it.

'Look,' said Clark, 'this isn't the time to get cocky. The only reason we've survived is because we saved every piece of food, every penny, everything lesser people would have thrown out. Now if anything, we need to save more and we need to waste less. If these are the seven fat years, then we better save everything we can. 'Cause someday this is going to end. Someday a famine is going to come; as sure as we're sitting here, it's coming. And if we aren't prepared, it will end us. There's nothing in the world that's gonna save us, that will show us any mercy, if we aren't prepared.'

Now the rest of the family didn't believe any of that crap. Except for Susanna, who sat there, hung on every word, and nodded her head.

The first day Clark went to work after they had moved, he woke Sharon from her hangover.

'Now Sharon, this is important, I need to talk to you,' he said. She sat up and looked at him at first but then her eyes glazed over and she started to stare at the floor as she held her forehead. 'Sharon? Sharon?'

'I'm listening, Clark! Jesus Christ!' she snapped.

'I need to give you something,' he said.

'Really?' That got her attention.

'I need to trust you with something important, and you can't screw it up,' he said.

'Can you just spit it out so I can go back to sleep?' she said.

'Look, don't tell the kids you have this, don't tell anyone, and promise me on your life you will only use this in an emergency.' Now for a lot of people this kind of speech could only be about a gun. But the Morgans already had a gun or four or five, and they held no such reverence for such a thing, any more than other people do for a coffee maker. What Clark took out of his back pocket was a credit card.

Now that stupor Sharon was in broke faster than the speed of light. Her eyes looked like ping pong balls and she snapped to her feet and grabbed it out of his hand. Sharon Morgan jumped around her bedroom like a toddler on Christmas.

'Sharon!' She stopped and looked at him with a frown on her face. 'Sharon, you remember what I said, right!?'

'Yes,' she said, 'only use it for emergencies... and beer.' Clark looked at her. 'Just kidding, God.'

Sharon saw Clark out the door as she said he looked handsome in his shirt and tie. When he drove off in that Volkswagen van, her eyes darkened and she smiled ear to ear and kinda looked like the Grinch in that cartoon, wonderfully awful idea and all.

That night when Clark Morgan came home he got a shock that a man at the end of long hard day could hardly stand. When he stepped out of his VW van he saw where that ugly old brown couch had been was a brand new, outside couch. A couch with thin arms and a thin back, and believe it or not, a diagonal checkered pattern of purple and blue-green squares.

Danny ran out the front door laughing his head off, holding a plastic gun and getting pelted by ping pong balls. Sharon appeared in the doorway, holding another plastic gun, the source of those ping pongs. She walked out and Clark hardly recognized her. Her straight black hair was now curly, and instead of a Raiders jersey she had a jacket on that was black on the left side and white on the right side, and the right sleeve was black and the left sleeve was white, and on her head was a bright purple-pink derby.

'Sharon!' he yelled. He ran in the house and looked around the living room, and at least a third of his clutter was gone. The living room couch was gone too, and in its place was a brand new one not unlike the one outside only its squares were pink and white. Standing at the living room window were the other kids, looking back and forth between him and their mother.

'Sharon, what did you do!?' he said, walking outside again. 'Did you hire moving men?'

'No!' she answered, 'Those kids helped me 'cause they hated that crap as much as I do!'

'You threw it out!?'

'Not all of it. I sold some of the lamps.'

'Why did you do this? 'Cause you're too proud?' Clark said.

Sharon narrowed her eyes. 'How proud do you have to be to not want to live in a God damn junk yard!?'

'And this!' he pointed at her clothes. 'How do you justify that?'

'But Clark,' she said in a lilting voice, 'I have a hat.' She held her hat and turned around and smiled.

Now that was one of the stupidest arguments that Clark Morgan had ever heard. It was so stupid that he didn't know how to respond. All he could think to do is sit on that tacky, gaudy, brand-new outside couch. Sharon went inside, grabbed two beers, came back out and sat next to him. She opened both their beers and lit a cigarette.

And that was that. She had won. If she had thought of it, she would have said 'checkmate,' but she didn't even think to say 'checkers-mate.' But she didn't have to. Clark knew that there was nothing he could do that wouldn't just make it worse.

'This is just another storm we have to weather,' said Clark.

'Clark, I called the bank and what I spent hardly made a dent,' she said, 'besides what's done is done and there's nothing we can do about it now.'

Those four kids stared out the window at their parents on the outside couch and the uneasy peace forming between them.

'Mom totally said she wasn't going to do this,' said Susanna.

'So she lied,' said Enos. 'You lied to Danny ten times today. He held it for hours when you told him Skeletor was in the bathroom.'

'Do skeletons even poop?' said Danny.

'I never lie to Dad, never,' said Susanna.

'You always side with Dad,' said Danny.

'Dad's always right. Even when he's wrong he's right,' said Susanna. 'You just have to look harder. You just have to try and understand him. Not that it's Mom's fault. It's nobody's fault. Change is just hard sometimes, even when it's for the better. I just hate contradictions.'

'You hate everything,' said Danny. Susanna smacked him on the head and he accidentally shot off another ping pong.

'I didn't hate that,' said Susanna.

'Hey look,' said Leroy.

The kids watched their parents through the window as Sharon kissed Clark, then he put his arm around her and smiled.

'They'll be fine,' said Susanna. 'Come on, dudes.'

The kids then ran to the inside couch and turned on the TV. Enos leaned up against his sister and she put her arm around him. They occasionally looked around the giant living room that was now theirs. And it looked a lot bigger without all that crap in it.

Chapter 2

Till now the Morgans had never learned about their neighbors. The ones on one side of their house, they never did, and God only knows what happened over there. But the ones on the other side, they did.

This whole time Susanna never got the mail. She used her privilege as the only daughter to get out of jobs like that. Only this time it didn't work, and at the mailbox she heard an awful noise. She looked and saw a neighbor boy in front of his garage trying to play an electric guitar, and he didn't know what the hell he was doing. Susanna decided to leave that junk mail in the box and walked over to get a better look at that thing--the guitar I mean.

David Solomon, Davy, as the Morgans would come to call him, reached up with one of his strong arms and pulled his long black hair back behind his ear, revealing a gigantic muscular jaw and a face like a lion.

He was learning to play the guitar to try and meet girls, but when Susanna came up to him he thought it was working a lot faster than he had ever hoped. Her rose-colored hair flew freely in the breeze, except for the two little pigtails she had tied up with long purple ribbons. Her body, wrapped in a lime green t-shirt, moved and twisted half-independently inside her purple overalls, like a cobra in a basket.

I would like to say it was love at first sight but there probably isn't such a thing. Susanna had only gotten to play an electric guitar twice in her life, both times at church. And that electric guitar was the only thing she was interested in. And Davy wasn't thinking with his heart or his head; he was thinking with another part of his body. In fact Davy was so infatuated with her that he let her take that prized possession of his right out of his hands with not even a hello.

Susanna casually moved one hand up and down the neck and strummed the strings with the other. She eventually started singing softly to herself. 'Don't say what you mean; you might spoil your face. Walk in the crowd, you won't leave any trace...'

'You're pretty gnarly,' Davy said.

'Yeah? And you stink on ice,' answered Susanna.

'Why don't you give me some lessons sometime?' he said.

'Lesson one,' said Susanna as she raised her hand so high and brought that pick down so hard that she broke every one of those strings--well most of them, anyway. She then handed it back to that bewildered boy and said, 'Whoops.' His orange-brown eyes grew large in shock. She walked back in her house without even getting the mail. She made one of her brothers get it after all.

'Jesus,' said Davy, 'what a bi... babe.'

Davy tried to talk to Susanna the next day when she came outside to sit on the couch to read a book. He complimented her and told some lies about himself. He asked her to go to one of his many parties but she only

rolled her eyes and ignored him. She ignored him until he awkwardly walked back to his own house, than she eventually went back inside her house.

Davy would come outside periodically and look at the Morgans' house, racking his brain on what to do, until luck would have it, Leroy walked out the front door.

Now for some reason Leroy was known for going on very long walks. No one knew why and he couldn't think of the words to explain it. You might think he did it to think, but he really wasn't much of a thinker. You might think he did it to be alone, but he had his own room now. The answer might have been that just putting one foot in front of the other was all it took to keep his simple little mind entertained.

But anyway, when Leroy came out of that house and started walking down the street, Davy ran to meet him.

'Hey, where you going?' Davy said as he ran up to meet Leroy. Leroy looked at him and was shocked and embarrassed. He wasn't sure what he was more embarrassed about, that he had this ritual or that he couldn't explain why he did it.

'I uh was, uh...uh...' Leroy said and maybe repeated several times.

'Kool,' said Davy, Hell he wasn't even listening to Leroy, not closely anyway. Davy went on to ask Leroy several questions.

'Hi, I'm David,' said Davy. He looked at Leroy, begging a response.

'Uh... uh... Leroy.'

'Leroy?' said Davy, 'that's Kool man, that's original. I'll tell you something, dude, you're going to be the only Leroy at this school, totally.'

'Uh... great,' said Leroy.

Davy laughed. 'You're going to Los Fronteriza High, right?'

'Uh yeah.'

'Look, relax, dude, it's Kool,' said Davy. 'The high school in this town is awesome, dude, there's like three girls for every guy.'

'Really?' said Leroy.

'Don't worry dude,' said Davy. 'I'll give you a head start.'

'Like on homework?' said Leroy.

'No, a party, dude,' said Davy, smiling. 'You know you'll never catch anything if you don't put your line in the water once in a while. Where'd you move from?'

'Oilville,' said Leroy.

Davy went on to ask Leroy several questions and he didn't really listen to those answers, either. And Leroy was starting to panic 'cause he was afraid that at any minute, with any footstep, this other boy was going to figure out they weren't going anyplace. But as Davy's conversation turned to the impersonal subjects of sports and music, Leroy relaxed, and Davy started to listen.

Now Leroy and Davy were like oil and water and normally would never have been friends; in fact, the only time Davy would probably talk to a boy like Leroy was to make fun of him, but Leroy was Davy's in.

Davy almost showed his prejudice about Raiders fans, which Leroy was one, and Davy was shocked to find another boy his age that liked Merle Haggard. But Davy invited Leroy to his party tomorrow and said he could bring any friends or siblings he wanted.

'Catch you tomorrow, Leroy,' said Davy.

'OK Davy,' said Leroy. Davy raised an eyebrow, but then just smiled. Few people actually called him Davy.

When Leroy got home he told his parents about the party he was invited to, and they casually said it was more than fine if he went. That night he lay down in his bed and just as he was about to go to sleep a hand pulled him out of that bed and threw him into the other one.

'That's my bed, pee-wee!' Calvin yelled. Now that was one short war, thank God. Leroy looked at the door to his room and saw Susanna there. She had let Calvin in the house quietly just so he could throw Leroy out of his bed and she could watch.

Now as soon as that voice was heard in that house, the whole family came into that bedroom. Enos and Danny jumped into Calvin's arms. Calvin had dark hair and thick eyebrows like his mother. He also had oversized arms and a slight pot belly, but in spite of that belly he was actually quite handsome. And as far as Enos and Danny were concerned, Calvin was He-Man; they just hadn't got around to making his action figure yet.

But Clark and Sharon didn't want Calvin to go into the Marines, but Calvin did it anyway. Maybe Calvin joined the Marines 'cause he wanted to be like his dad, 'cause some of Calvin's earliest memories of his father were of him wearing an Army uniform. But Clark didn't want Calvin to be like him, he wanted him to be better.

But Clark's fears were eventually relieved 'cause Grenada sure as hell wasn't Vietnam. The whole time Calvin was there he never fired his rifle and he never got shot at. In fact, depending on your age, there's a good chance you never even heard of Grenada. 'Cause when those guys write the history books, they're more than willing to write about every atrocity committed by every man and his dog, but they never wasted any ink on the good times. But just because no one wrote about them didn't mean they didn't happen. They're hidden in the gaps of the timeline.

That night the whole family stayed up longer than they should have, sitting around the dinner table, talking like it was dinner time, but there was no dinner. The kids kept meaning to ask Calvin what it was like--the war, I mean--but they always lost their courage. They learned from their father not to ask about such things.

But besides that Calvin was in culture shock. Part of him couldn't believe that his family was living in this big house and had this crazy furniture. He half-expected the real family that owned this house to come home and tell them to get the hell out. And the clothes his mother was now wearing made him laugh out loud, which made her slap him.

'Calvin, I know I said some things before you left,' said Clark, 'but now that it's all over, I have to say I'm proud of you.'

'We all are,' Sharon smiled, holding her head and her cigarette in one hand.

'I know it was one of the hardest things you did in your life,' said Clark, 'if not the hardest.'

'Thanks,' said Calvin, 'it's Kool, don't mention it.'

'But now that this macho bullshit is over,' said Clark, 'it's time for you to get a real job and go to school.'

'Oh totally, I'm already on it,' said Calvin chuckling.

Clark had to work tomorrow so he went to bed and Sharon went with him 'cause she was a little tipsy. Like a lot of nights she slept in one of her crazy outfits. The two younger boys had to go to bed, regardless of them not starting school yet. But maybe it was all right for the older kids to stay up, watch David Letterman and talk about the things they were afraid to talk about in front of their parents.

'... and that's why it's better to pick up chicks at the mall,' said Calvin to Leroy in tone like a swaggering professor. 'There's always hot chicks at the grocery store, but they always show up with their mom or their kids.'

'Their kids?' said Leroy.

'So what's up man, you going to a party?' Calvin asked his brother.

'Oh, this guy said I should, like, go. But I don't know if I want to go,' answered Leroy.

'Why not?' Calvin said. 'There could be girls.'

'Girls don't really like me,' said Leroy.

'Whatever dude, girls love me, and you're my brother, so some of me had to rub off on you. Now look man, you just need some strategy.'

'...duh, look man, doy, you just need some, doy da, strabeby, in think so, huh huh huh,' finished Susanna. Calvin ignored her.

'Like what?' asked Leroy.

'Now look,' said Calvin, 'no one will tell you this, but the first thing you got to do is lie. Build yourself up dude, especially since none of these girls are going to know you. You just moved; say you were on the football team or something.'

Almost everything that came out of Calvin's mouth was a God damn lie. But who doesn't like a good story now and then.

Susanna burst out laughing. 'No one's gonna believe Leroy plays football,' she said. 'He couldn't tackle a cardboard cutout, even if he shot it with a shotgun first.'

'Don't listen to her, man,' continued Calvin. 'Look girls can't tell when a guy is lying. I don't know why or how, but it's a God damn gift from God, dude. And you know what? Even the ones that can tell, like it. It shows them you're trying.'

'There's some truth to that,' said Susana. 'I've met girls like that, although Calvin's probably met more guys like that.' Calvin still ignored her.

'Look, the bottom line, dude,' said Calvin, 'even if I have to hit a girl over the head with a club, I'm not going to let my brother die a virgin.'

Calvin was like a second father to all of those kids and though he meant well, this whole discussion made Leroy so uncomfortable that if you don't feel sorry for him, you're one cold son of bitch.

'Leroy,' said Susanna, 'when school starts, you should like, tell them you need a day off to get tested for AIDS. Then no one will think you you're a virgin.'

'Damn it, Susanna,' said Calvin, 'what if the girls think he's gay!?' Leroy, don't listen to her, dude, she's just trying to mess with you.'

'Like your ideas, are all like, totally that better?' said Susanna. 'Oh Calvin you invented the sticky note?' she said sarcastically. 'You, dated Mary Lou Retton in high school? I want to have your baby, a big fat baby just like you!' Soon as she finished he picked up the TV Guide and hit her on the head with it.

Susanna punched him in the shoulder and promptly said, 'Hey, hey, hey!' Calvin tried to ignore her but she started scat singing the Fat Albert theme and wouldn't stop.

'Would you shut up?' Calvin said. 'Damn it, even if this was funny in the first minute, this is the tenth minute man, and now It's just annoying.' Of course that was her goal. And Susanna picked up a guitar and started strumming along with her singing. She did it nonstop until Calvin got up and went to his bed. And she stood in the bedroom door way doing it still. Finally he got up pushed her out and closed that door. Susanna than went back and jumped on that couch and started staring at Leroy, then she poked him in the head, again and again and again, nearly fifty times.

'You know,' said Susanna, 'that neighbor kid is kinda cute.'

Leroy just looked at her, confused.

Then she smacked him. She figured her work was done and went to bed. Leroy soon went to his bed.

The next day Davy couldn't wait for his party. A lot of people were coming but he was hoping for one in particular. He looked out the window and saw that particular one walk out of the Morgan house with Sharon and down the street. He saw them come back in a couple of hours and go back in their house. He had no idea where they went; all he cared about is that he saw that particular one.

That night cars were lined up around the block, and the faint sounds of people were heard from Davy's house. And when Leroy and Calvin knocked on the door, the person who opened the door was one of the most beautiful women they had ever seen. Calvin smiled as the women shook their hands and seemed incredibly friendly. Calvin took this friendliness to mean that this pretty little high school girl must be into him.

'Hello, I'm Amy Solomon,' she said and asked for their names and waited for them to answer and listened intently. *Oh, this is Davy's sister, thought Calvin.* But then she said, 'I'm David's mother.' No kidding, and Calvin's eyes looked like an owl's.

Now when she said her name was Amy, that was a lie. Her name was Kanokwan, but after all the weird looks she got from people ever since she moved to the US of A she figured, what the hell.

But anyway, this was a woman going on 40 and she could pass for a teenager. In fact, she was carded all the time. Calvin's amazement soon turned to disappointment 'cause he figured parents at a party meant nothing fun was going on. But he was wrong.

The radio blared,

'It's a dead man's party, Who could ask for more?...'

And that woman walked through the loud music and clouds of cigarette smoke to the kitchen. She walked past a bunch of teenagers and put her arms around her only son, who kissed her on the forehead and then he opened a Budweiser right in front of her. Both Calvin and Leroy were amazed, and Calvin just came out said it.

'Dude, I wish our parents took pointers from her when we were growing up,' he smiled.

Most of the teenagers in that house where gathered around Davy, and he was charming the pants off them, some of them literally. In fact he put his arm around a pretty little thing who was a cheerleader at his school. She passed up every offer from every football player from that school just for a chance to be with Davy. If you saw this same scene a thousand years ago or so you would have sworn to God that Davy was a young King Hroogar in his Mead Hall.

'Were you been all summer?' said Davy.

'Oh like, my family went to Nova Scotia,' said the cheerleader. 'It was totally gay; everyone there was such a nerd.'

'You gotta give them a break,' said Davy. 'They have a totally different culture over there.'

'Oh like, you mean, Canada?' said the cheerleader.

'No dude,' said Davy, 'the east coast.' The other kids laughed.

Now when Davy saw Leroy, his hopes went up but then he noticed that the door was closed behind him and the only person with him was another handsome boy. He thought to himself, *Can't that boy get anything right?* That's right, Susanna wasn't coming and if you thought Clark was going to let his daughter go to a party, like that, then you're out of your God damn mind. Besides, she didn't want to go.

But Davy never stopped smiling. He lifted up his hand and yelled, 'Hey Leroy, come here, dude!' Davy figured that Susanna would have to be a long-term project. Now when Leroy heard his name called he smiled and

walked over to Davy and Davy put his arm around him like he was an old buddy, and Leroy smiled. Calvin smiled to see Leroy fit in so damn fast. Then Calvin jumped right in with confidence and charm to match anyone there and he gave Davy a hearty handshake and Davy handed him a beer and they drank together and talked together like they were old buddies.

Mostly what they talked about was Leroy, believe it or not. And Calvin hardly embarrassed him and even tried to build him up. Leroy mostly just said, 'yes,' 'no' and 'oh yeah, I think so.' But he smiled all the while.

There was a point when an obnoxious doofus pointed at Calvin's cowboy boots. 'Nice boots buddy,' he said, 'where's your hor...'

His voice broke up at the end 'cause Calvin gave him a look that could make a train take a u-turn even when the tracks weren't going that way.

Davy turned to the other kids and said, 'Careful, these dudes like Merle Haggard.' Now normally all those kids would have laughed. But the combination of Davy thinking it's Kool and the intimidating presence of Calvin changed all their minds like a switch. In fact, if Davy and Calvin decided the world was flat every one of those kids would have agreed with them.

'You got to be careful messing with a real redneck,' said Calvin in a slight redneck accent, which he really didn't have. Davy laughed and agreed half-sarcastically.

Davy looked at Leroy and smiled and then thought to himself, *Oh how could I forget?* Davy reached into the fridge and gave Leroy a beer. Leroy grabbed that beer and opened it and guzzled it down.

Now Clark and Sharon let Calvin drink. After all, he was a God damn Marine. Besides, he showed maturity and moderation doing it, a hell of a lot more than his mother did. But if they ever saw Leroy drink, they would kick the shit out of him.

This wasn't Leroy's first beer; he had drunk several times before and had even smoked pot several times. Part of him did it 'cause he wanted to fit in, and another part of him did it 'cause he liked it. He had often thought of telling his parents, to clear his conscience, but he never did, 'cause they'd kick the shit of him.

Now God only knows how many kids are dirty. You may think your kids are clean and they might be dirty. You might think they're dirty and they might be clean. Or it might be somewhere in the middle. Not that you can't find out, but it is hard. It is one hard, thick fog to see through.

If it's any consolation, if they are dirty, they can still grow up to be fine, decent people. And when they're grown up and you're old they might just get the courage tell you all the things they did, and you guys might just laugh your asses off.

So Leroy was dirty...maybe it meant he was weak, or maybe it meant he wasn't a coward, but he wasn't lost. He was probably less lost than anyone in that room.

As soon as everyone felt comfortable with each other, Davy and Calvin started to engage in a friendly competition that you will see whenever you put two skirt chasers in the same room with pretty girls. I guess you could call it a flirting dual. Both of them flirted with every damn girl there. And they told so many lies it could make the world spin backwards. And occasionally they turned and teased each other, trying to neutralize the competition.

'Oh, is that what happened?' said Calvin once to Davy, and it didn't faze him at all.

'I guess I just get out more than you,' said Davy.

Now they never really insulted each other 'cause they didn't want to get in a fight. It was a fine line. They just wanted a girl. Soon Calvin saw a girl that Davy seemed to have missed, she was sitting in the corner puffing on a cigarette. Her frizzy, soft, brown hair got his attention.

Chocolate cake, he said to himself. He sat down next to her. 'Now that is some awesome hair. What did it take to do that?' he said.

'What, you looking for beauty secrets?' she said.

'Yeah man, give me some tips. Maybe I'll go to barber college.'

'Oh my God.'

'Either way, I wonder if they got special deals for veterans,' he said. 'I just got back from Grenada.'

'Where?' You see, she forgot about that war, too.

'A very important military mission.' He talked like school teacher. 'You see, when we landed on those beaches my boat got caught on a God damn reef, dude, and there were like sharks all over that place, like they knew psychically there was going to be blood.' Now believe it or not some girls at least acted like they believed that story. But this one didn't.

'Sharks? Really? Are you sure they weren't pool toys?' she said, leaning forward. Now Calvin understood why Davy left this girl alone.

While all this was going on, Davy noticed Leroy looking at his electric guitar, leaning up against the piano. Davy played the piano since he was a little boy, and he was pretty good at it. But girls aren't interested in a piano they want a guy with a guitar.

'You play?' asked Davy.

'Yes.' Leroy did. Now Leroy didn't learn the guitar to get girls. He learned to play it for church. He never thought of getting girls with it, and like, Susanna he rarely played an electric guitar.

Davy picked up the guitar and handed it to Leroy and said, 'Play some Merle Haggard,' and laughed. You'd think that that's all he knew about Leroy.

Davy turned on the speaker, and Leroy started to play. He was so nervous that he made mistakes all over the place and sang too softly. He played *Are The Good Times Really Over*, and when he got to the part, 'Are we

rolling down hill like a snowball headed for hell?' he thought of something, and Leroy didn't think that much, and then he started laughing out loud, and the other kids started to laugh with him.

'Sorry, I just started thinking,' said Leroy, 'this song is all wrong. Maybe it was right five years ago or so, but now I think it's wrong.'

Five years ago this song was dead-on, when Leroy would have thought his life would never get better. But now with his new life, this song was wrong.

'Yeah that song's stupid,' said some random kid.

Davy laughed and went back to work on that cheerleader. This was about the time Calvin was getting blown off by that girl. Sheena was her name and she saw how Davy seemed unnaturally interested in Leroy and she hated Davy, so she thought that she'd steal that boy away from him. She stood up without saying goodbye to Calvin and walked over to Leroy.

'You want to go talk somewhere?' Sheena said to Leroy.

'Uh... uh... sure,' said Leroy.

Calvin looked on as that girl that shunned him grabbed Leroy by the hand and ran off with him. He was mad she left him, but he smiled to see a girl leave with Leroy, and he giggled to himself.

Leroy and Sheena walked outside and sat on the curb. Sheena lit up a cigarette as they exchanged names.

'Leroy, really?' she said.

'Yeah,' said Leroy, wishing just once in his life that someone wouldn't think his name was weird the first time they heard it.

'Dude, I have never met anyone named Leroy. Not that my name is much better thanks to that damn jungle movie.'

'That one guy is an ignorant sleaze. It's like he never saw natural hair before.' She paused. 'You're not friends with him, are you?' she asked Leroy, and he knew she was talking about Calvin.

'He's--uh, he's my brother,' he said.

'What?!' she said. She was silent for a second and then laughed. 'You can't pick your relatives, can you?'

Leroy laughed, 'No, no, you can't.' He laughed, but what he didn't say is that if he could pick his brother, he probably would still pick Calvin. 'So are you friends with Davy?'

'He's a dork.'

'Then why do you... do you hang out with him?'

'I just come here for the beer and cigarettes,' she said. 'I've never seen you before. Are you new here? Did you just move or something?'

'Kinda, yes.'

'From where?' She was less conversing and more interrogating.

'Oilville,' said Leroy.

'Oilville, really? Isn't that where they have all those Klan rallies?'

'I, uh, I'm not sure.' But Leroy was sure, but who in God's name wants to admit something like that?

'Hey come here,' she said and as Leroy leaned forward, she kissed him on the lips. And then she did it again. This was not only an unexpected thing to be put in the middle of the conversation, but as far as Leroy was concerned, it was the most unexpected thing to be put in his life.

She then just got up and started walking down the street. 'I got to get home before my mom gets off work.'

'Well, wait can I see you again?' asked Leroy.

'Like where, here?' she asked, laughing.

'Yeah... or... I live next door,' he said.

'You mean the house with that crazy couch in front of it?' she asked.

'Yeah, yes!' said Leroy.

Leroy walked back inside and Calvin saw that he was happy and had a clue as to what happened. He threw an arm over Leroy's shoulder and kept talking to Davy.

The next day Leroy ran out in the morning and came back about eleven and spent most of his time sitting on the outside couch. And wouldn't you know it, that girl came walking up and sat on the couch next to him.

'Why do you keep a couch outside?' she asked.

'So we can sit outside,' said Leroy with a big smile. Sheena laughed. She thought Leroy was joking but he was only telling her the only answer he could think of. They laughed together. And Leroy took out a box and gave it to Sheena. She laughed and opened it. Inside was a ring and she laughed and put it on, and she laughed some more. And then she looked at Leroy and he wasn't laughing, he just was smiling. She looked into his eyes and then felt the ring with her other hand. And somehow she realized that this wasn't a joke.

'OH MY GOD!' she said jumping to her feet. 'What are you, stupid or something?!

'Why do people keep asking me that?' he said.

To understand what's happening you have to understand that his whole life any money Leroy ever earned his parents confiscated, 'cause they needed it. But one day they started letting him keep some of that money, and he saved up about a hundred dollars. He never spent that money; he was scared to death to. He knew some day that that money could very well save his life or the life of someone in his family. But that morning he took that money and put a down payment on the cheapest ring he could find.

Now you probably think that Leroy was the stupidest boy on the face of the earth. But you have to understand that most of his life Leroy grew up around very rural, very poor people, and to them getting married at his age wasn't as weird as it was in other places. But all the same, he was the stupidest boy on the face of the earth.

'What the hell is wrong with you!' she tore off the ring and threw it down like it was a black widow.

'I thought you liked me,' said Leroy. 'I just thought if you knew what I wanted...'

'We're teenagers! We just met last night! I kissed three other guys at that party.'

Leroy looked up at her. 'You're the only girl I've ever kissed in my life.'

'What is this? A joke? Are your friends hiding around here!?' she yelled.

'No I would never do that,' said Leroy.

'You're a freak,' yelled Sheena, and she ran away.

Leroy started crying. He couldn't go in and face his family, so he went on one of his walks, and walked and cried until it he couldn't cry any more. And when he came home he lay in his bed and stared at the wall. His mother could tell he was upset so she went in to try and comfort him. He wouldn't talk, so she just put her hand on his shoulder while she smoked. When Clark got home he tried to talk to Leroy but he wouldn't talk to his father, either. Calvin tried to comfort him too, and Calvin didn't know every detail, but he could guess what had happened. That girl rejected him.

While Clark and Sharon watched TV they held each other a little closer thinking of Leroy. As far as they were concerned he was the kindest, gentlest man they ever met, and this probably wasn't the right world for him.

But sometimes this cruel world slacks off on implementing its evil plans, because Enos and Danny heard a rapping on their window that night. Danny poked his head out the window.

'Hello,' he said but before Sheena could say anything he said, 'After these messages we'll be right back,' and he disappeared. 'Hello,' he returned and then disappeared again. 'Do you like He-Man?' he said popping up again.

'Uh, I'm...' said Sheena.

'Look, Look, Look!' and Danny showed the girl his new He-Man action figure. He was showing everybody that damn thing ever since Sharon bought it for him. 'Did you see the one where he was actually friends with Skeletor and they fought Evil-seed together?'

Sheena didn't know what else to do but laugh.

'You idiot,' said Enos, appearing, 'she doesn't give a damn about your stupid toy.'

'You're the idiot, dude,' replied Danny, 'everyone likes He-Man, right?' He turned to Sheena.

'Well, it's fun to watch when you're high.' Then she thought better of what she said. She hadn't really been around children for a while. 'I mean high on life.' That's the best she could come up with. 'Leroy lives here, right?'

'He's in the room on the opposite side of the house,' said Enos, and he slammed the window. Sheena was surprised to find a kid so young and so rude.

She walked around to the other side of the house and rapped on that window. Calvin opened the window, and put on a big grin.

'Hey baby,' he said.

Sheena rolled her eyes, 'Where's Leroy?' Now Leroy heard that voice and rushed to the window. Calvin got out of the way and Leroy poked his head out.

'Leroy, I'm sorry,' said Sheena. 'I acted like a total bitch.'

'No, I'm sorry, that was so stupid, I'm sorry,' said Leroy.

'Yeah, I just... that was pretty stupid, and I was pretty freaked out,' she agreed, 'but I still, shouldn't have... I wondered if we could just hang out sometime. Maybe.'

'Uh da, sure,' said Leroy.

'Now don't jump to conclusions, OK?' she said. 'We.. we're just hanging out. Like a movie or something.'

'Yeah, I'm just... yeah,' replied Leroy. Then they stared at each other.

'But we're not together,' she said. They stared at each other again. And she kissed his cheek.

'You got it, right?' said Sheena. 'I'm not your girl friend and I'm sure as hell not your fiancé, OK?' She walked away. 'I'm not your girlfriend.'

Leroy shut the window, and turned to Calvin, who was smiling.

'I got a girlfriend! I got a girlfriend! I got a girlfriend!' cried Leroy.

'I knew you could do it, pee-wee,' said Calvin. 'Now look, next time you meet her, you should try this. It always worked for me. Get your guitar and play her a romantic song with her name in it.'

'What romantic song has Sheena in it?' asked Leroy. They both thought really hard and they could only think of one song and they both started singing it.

'Sheena is a punk rocker, Sheena is a punk rocker, Sheena is a punk rocker now.' When they were done Calvin put his arm around Leroy and asked him a question.

'Now dude, OK, what was she talking about when she said fiancé?' he asked.

Leroy looked around the room as if to find a lie. 'I think it might be a black thing.'

Now after the stupid thing Leroy did, coming back to meet him was one of the stupidest things Sheena had ever done in her life. But sometimes if people didn't do stupid things, once in a while, nothing in this world would ever get done.

And when Leroy did that stupid thing he did, it scared her, but as she thought about it, she had a weird feeling. She didn't want to get married, but it made her feel really special that someone wanted her that way. And she hadn't felt special in a long time. It was like a fire to her. She didn't want to

put her fingers in it, but she wanted its warmth. And yes, in a lot of ways this was really stupid, but like I said before, if people didn't do stupid things, once in a while, nothing in this world would get done.

Sheena walked off the Morgans' yard just to see Davy walking on. She looked at him as if to say, *what the hell is going on?* He just shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Sheena shook her head and walked away.

Now Susanna in some ways was a very weird girl, but in some ways she was very normal. Like a lot of young girls, she had a picture of Jesus on one wall and every morning she got up she looked at it for a minute or two. And like a lot of young girls, on one wall she had four posters--Michael Jackson, Robert Smith, David Bowie, and Jerry Harrison--and she looked at them for a couple minutes every night before she went to bed. Now what the overlap on this was across the world is debatable, but here it did overlap.

The Morgan family listened to a lot of country music like Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, and Dolly Parton, and they all liked the same country singers. But when it came to other music, the parents didn't know what the kids were thinking of, and that trend was all over the place. But Clark and Sharon saw this trend before when their parents didn't get why they liked Elvis and The Beatles.

Now for the most part parents and children liking different music had only happened in the last hundred years or so. And sometimes Susanna wondered if that was a bad thing. Maybe it put a wedge between them that shouldn't be there. But another thought she had was about the song *Pretty Polly*. She had played her guitar and sang that song many times. And when it first came out in the 1600s it must have taken an awful long time for it to work its way across the British Isles. Back then there was no radio, or cassette tapes, and it took so long for that song to get to the kids their parents were dead before they had a chance to tell their kids it was crap. Maybe the music was just moving out so fast that the parents didn't have time to keep up with it. And maybe it would get so fast that in the future it won't just be kids and parents liking different music but maybe people one or two years older or younger than each other. And she thought she had already seen this trend starting to form in her brothers. And this trend did correlate with a lot of bad things, but what it really was, was a symptom of speed. Things were getting faster and faster, and maybe that could be good, 'cause if we go to a bad place too fast, maybe we can get out of there just as fast. Besides, one day Susanna listened to Elvis and the Beatles and they weren't that bad. Maybe nothing was getting taken away; maybe things were just getting added.

As Susanna sat and thought about these things, she heard a rapping on her window. She looked over and saw Davy waving at her through the glass. Unlike Sheena, he found what he wanted right away. Davy was so handsome that this strategy of his had worked several times. He just had to show up. In fact there were some girls out there right now who wished he

would rap on their window. Susanna sat up and looked at him and realized he was one of the handsomest boys she had ever seen. She stared at him and thought long and hard about what she should do. She got up and walked up to the window and opened it.

'Hi, I just wanted to talk to you,' he said smiling. To pull himself into her room, he put his hands on the window sill.

And Susanna slammed the window shut on his fingers with all her might. Davy leaped back, screaming in pain, as Susanna ran out her bedroom door, opened up the front door and yelled at the top of her lungs, 'SHERE KHAN! KILL THAT SON OF A BITCH!'

And that monster came running out the front door. That's right, she thought long and hard how she was going to torture that asshole for all he was worth.

Davy wasn't sure at first what Susanna meant by "Shere Khan," but when that dog came around the corner of the house, Davy would have rather it had been the original Shere Khan. I don't know if you have ever had a pit bull mad at you, but it's one hell of an experience. Shere Khan's eyes were shining, his barks were defining and when he opened his mouth, Davy's first thought was, *Oh my God, there's a lot of room in there.* Davy tried to jump the wooden fence but his hands hurt so much he couldn't pull himself up and he fell to the ground and started running across the backyard and around the house into the street and back to his house, with Shere Khan on his heels all the way. And just when it looked like that dog was gonna get him, Susanna called him back, and she laughed like a James Bond villain.

Now Shere Khan looked scary but if you noticed, his ears weren't cropped. He had never killed anything in his life or hardly even hurt it a little, and it would have taken a lot for him to do it. He mostly just barked at people. He figured that's all he needed to do 'cause he knew how God damn scary he was.

Clark Morgan got up yelling, 'Susanna! What trouble are you stirring up now?'

'Why do you always think it's me, Dad?'

'Ninety percent of the time it is. Remember that substitute teacher?' he answered.

'Look, I helped tie her up but I didn't take her clothes off,' said Susanna. 'And I didn't even start this one; it was that stupid kid next door. He wanted me to let him in my window or something,' she answered.

'Susanna,' said Clark, 'I'm not kidding.'

'Uh... well...'

'We're going to have a talk about this, you God damn harpy,' said Clark.

Clark went outside over to her window and there was blood on it and there was blood on the fence. He then grabbed Susanna and walked over to the Solomon house. Right there in the middle of the night, he knocked on the door.

'What's wrong?' said Davy's mother.

'I need to talk to your kid,' said Clark.

Now Davy could have hidden in his room and let his mother send that angry man away. But he might have been an asshole but he wasn't a coward; he was incredibly brave. He walked right up to that man.

'Sir, I'm really sorry. That was a really stupid thing to do and it will never happen again, and I'm glad it ended like it did,' Davy said.

'I guess so,' said Clark, 'but you're damn lucky she called that dog instead of me kid, 'cause I would have shot you dead.' Now Clark was lying; he probably would have just shot him in the arm.

Susanna looked at Davy's bloody bruised hands. 'Looks like you won't play the guitar with those anytime soon. Guess you're just gonna have to play with yourself.' They left.

'David,' said his mother, 'I think you should stay away from those people for a while.'

'Mom, he didn't really mean that,' said Davy. He believed Clark but he was trying to calm his mother. 'Mom, everything's fine. Can you just do something for me?'

'Of course,' she said. She'd do anything for him, but what he said amazed her.

'Look, whatever you do,' he said, 'don't tell those neighbors I drink or smoke pot or do anything.'

'Oh God,' she said, 'you think I like to go around bragging about it?'

'I just need to make sure,' said Davy.

'Why?' she said.

'Because they're very stick-conservative people and I want them to think we are too,' said Davy.

Than David's mother thought that maybe this mania he had (and it was a mania) might be a good influence.

Clark and Susanna came back to the Morgan house and Calvin and Leroy got up to see what was going on. As Calvin and Clark spoke, Susanna looked at Leroy and smiled, and Leroy couldn't help but remember what Susanna said, "You know that neighbor kid is kinda cute," and Leroy thought that maybe he let that slip at the party.

'Susanna,' said Clark, 'you wipe that smile off your face.'

'Sorry Dad,' she said.

Chapter 3

When school started, Leroy and Susanna came out of the house with their backpacks to go down to the bus stop. And when Davy saw this, he decided that he'd walk with Leroy. Now Davy had a car. It was an old car, but it was a car; so normally he would have driven to school. He also thought of giving the Morgan kids a ride, but he thought that would be too much. So he'd walk to the bus stop with Leroy.

'Hey Leroy!' He ran up to him. 'What's up?'

'I don't know,' said Leroy.

'How's your hands, dork?' said Susanna. Davy's hands were bandaged.

'You got cable?' said Davy to Leroy.

'Well, my mom's talking about getting it,' said Leroy. Then Davy started talking about everything he saw on MTV last night. All the while he ignored Susanna. Leroy turned and said something to her, but she ignored him. Now all three of these kids were into skateboards but Susanna took one along with her for no reason sometimes, like a security blanket. While Davy and Leroy talked, she just rode on it at walking pace, chewing her bubble gum. Davy ignored that beautiful girl even though on that skateboard she almost looked like Cleopatra being carried by a horde of slaves.

At one point Susanna couldn't stand this anymore and she sped up ahead of those guys and stopped in front of them. She blew a bubble and licked the gum off her big lips.

'Look Leroy,' she said, 'this guy doesn't like you, and he is not your friend; he's totally just using you to get to me.'

'Well, he could be my friend,' said Leroy.

'Dude, why do you think this is about you?' said Davy. 'Why are you putting him down like that?'

'OK smart guy,' she said, 'if you're his friend, why don't you tell me something about him.'

Davy looked at her, and for a second she thought she beat him, until he opened his mouth.

'His favorite color is green, he likes Merle Haggard, The Ramones, and is kinda into Duran Duran, but I think he's kinda of embarrassed by that. He used to like KISS but not so much anymore. His favorite shows are Buck Rogers, and The Fall Guy, but he only likes, The Fall Guy, 'cause of that chick in it but he likes the girl in Buck Rogers, too. His favorite movie is Star Wars...'

'Dude, everyone's favorite movie is Star Wars,' she said.

'His second favorite movie is Smoky and the Bandit, 'cause he likes the girl in it. His favorite football team is The Raiders, and his favorite animal is the lobster.'

Even though Davy didn't seem like he was listening to Leroy at that party, he was, and he remembered a lot of it, just 'cause he was smart.

'Lobster!?' said Susanna. She didn't know that.

'I like the pinchers,' said Leroy.

'He says you like The Cure but he doesn't get them,' said Davy as he and Leroy walked by her.

'You know, man, like that, girl talk, that was, like, guy talk,' said Leroy.

'Sorry man,' said Davy, 'I just got caught up in the moment.' They walked off, leaving her behind, and kept talking. Then all of a sudden she rocketed past them on that skateboard and Davy felt something hit him in the back of his head. He felt back there and it was her bubble gum.

Davy couldn't go back home to get that bubblegum out; he'd miss the bus. Maybe he'd go back home and then drive his car, but then he could lose track of Leroy 'cause Leroy probably wasn't going to completely leave his sister. He was going to have that gum in his hair all damn day and that is no way to start a school year.

'She does that to me all the time,' said Leroy.

Now when Davy entered that school, he was still with Leroy and Susanna, but he went into the bathroom to wash some of the gum out of his hair, which didn't really work. When he came out he found Leroy, but Susanna ran off somewhere on her own. He figured just as well, as this was a long-term project.

Davy and Leroy had their first class together and Davy noticed when the teacher read off the names everyone turned their head and stared at Leroy when he raised his hand.

'Who'd name their kid Leroy?' whispered someone.

This is gonna be hard, thought Davy.

Davy sat next to Leroy in every class they had together and met him in the halls when they didn't have a class. Davy introduced him to all his friends and tried to build him up and make him at least kinda popular. But try as he might somehow it just wasn't working. Everyone seemed to look at him and say in their eyes, *What in God's name are you doing with geeky, awkward redneck?* Even though Leroy didn't have a redneck accent--none of the Morgans really did--they all seemed to know somehow. Part of it might have been the bad crooked tooth Leroy showed whenever he smiled. The Morgans could never afford braces. Plus the other kids kept wondering why Davy had bandages on his hands and why his hair looked so funny.

Outside one building there was a puddle, where a sprinkler was broken. And after one class Davy and some other kids were kicking water on the kids coming out of a building, the ones that were too weak to fight back. Davy tried to get Leroy to participate but Leroy didn't; he couldn't.

Later in the hallway, between classes, Davy heard someone say, 'Did you hear? Some new girl was riding her skateboard in the halls.'

'So?'

'Mr. Bacon told her, "no skate boards in the hall" and she told him to "eat shit," right out loud and to his face, and she just rode away, and he wussed out and didn't do anything.'

'Kool, Bacon sucks ass.'

Davy thought to himself, it couldn't be. But he kept hearing that story over and over again. And somehow he knew they were talking about Susanna.

By lunch time everyone was talking about it. Davy looked around that cafeteria for her. Susanna wasn't there. She was the most popular person in the room and she wasn't there.

Davy went to sit with his friends from last year but there was only one seat left and he hesitated on whether he should leave Leroy. But another kid sat at that table and Leroy sat at another.

Davy sat down next to Leroy. He was still determined to make this work, even though every time people looked at him and Leroy he wasn't bringing Leroy up, Leroy was bringing him down. The icing on the cake was when Sheena came and sat next to Leroy, and Sheena wasn't that popular, either.

Davy thought about flirting with another girl but Susanna would find out. And he thought about telling some of his friends that he was just using Leroy to get to a girl but he knew Susanna would find out. As fast as that story about Susanna spread, he knew that if he was ever going to keep a secret in that school, he had to keep it to himself.

He looked over at Leroy and Sheena.

'So what classes do you have?' Sheena said.

'Well I got, like, this social studies class...' Leroy was interrupted by Sheena.

'Oh, my God,' she said looking at his schedule, 'we have health class together. That class is propaganda. It's just a bunch of bullshit. "Don't do drugs, blah-blah-blah, AIDS this, AIDS that." They'll probably make us watch that stupid movie with Jason Bateman and that guy from Cheers.'

'This is just the first day,' said Davy.

Chapter 4

Now one day Clark Morgan thought that maybe he had been riding his family too hard, 'cause he still forced them to skimp and save as much as they could. So on his way back from work he stopped at the grocery store and bought seven pork chops, one nice, big, delicious pork chop for each member of the family. The dog could chew the bones if he wanted.

But when he got home he found out that Sharon had already thought of a treat. She had two big frozen pizzas.

'Sharon you should have told me first,' he said.

'Clark, you never told me you were going to get pork chops,' she said.

'I wanted it to be a surprise,' Clark said.

'Me too,' she said.

'OK look, we'll pick one tonight and one the other night,' he said. And Clark gathered up those kids and sat them on the couch. And he asked them something they never thought they would hear.

'OK look, we got pork chops and pizza--what do you guys want to eat first?' asked Clark. All five of those kids looked at each other.

'Pizza!' yelled Danny.

'Pork chops,' said Enos.

'I don' care,' said Calvin.

'I like both,' said Leroy.

Susanna looked at her mother and though they were very different people, they had the same idea. Susanna walked up and whispered into Sharon's ear and Sharon whispered into Susanna's. Then they looked at the rest of family.

A half hour later Sharon and Susanna placed two big platters on the table.

'PORK CHOP PIZZA!' those two women yelled together. And that's what it was, chopped up pork chops on two pizzas. To Clark this seemed wasteful--they took two meals and turned them into one. If anything they should be doing the opposite. And then he thought, *Who the hell ever heard of a pork chop pizza?* But as those kids all dug in, he figured he better get some too. And when he ate it, it was pretty damn good. This silly, weird, stupid thing was pretty damn good. Now it was such a stupid, weird, silly thing that he half-expected the cops to come in and tell everybody it was illegal, but they didn't, and Clark smiled. And he thought, *this is America and I'm going to eat whatever the hell I want.*

'Danny,' he said, 'how was your day?'

Danny acted like he was about to give a speech. As far as he was concerned he was going to say the most important thing all night. 'I was in the sand box digging for gold and Derik' (like he expected the family to know who that was) 'had this big runny nose and I threw sand in his face and the sand stuck to his face.' The family laughed.

'You know you shouldn't go in that thing, man,' said Calvin. 'You don't know what kind of disgusting things are in there.'

'Is there poop in there?' Danny said.

'Danny, please, no poop talk while we're eating,' said Clark.

'There probably is some of that in there, dude,' said Calvin, 'no joke.'

'Really?' said Danny, almost happy about the idea.

'There's more than that,' said Susanna. 'Don't you know they put sandboxes over Indian burial grounds?'

'What?' said Danny, 'Why would they do that?'

'You see, they don't want those ghouls walking around eating people,' said Susanna. 'So that's when they got the idea to put sand boxes over them. With all those little kids playing in the sand, if the ghouls got hungry, they could just reach right up and grab a snack right there.'

'That's not true,' said Danny, but he half believed it.

'Well, believe whatever you want, dude,' said Susanna, 'but if you're ever in that thing and you see some sand start to move and a hand comes out, don't say I didn't warn you.'

Sharon laughed.

'Enos, what happened to you today?' said Clark.

'Nothing,' said Enos.

'Nothing?' asked Clark.

'Nothing.'

'What the hell happened--did you just stare at a wall all day?'

'Yes,' said Enos.

'Did it have any pictures on it?' asked Clark.

'No,' said Enos.

'Well, school sure has changed since I was kid,' said Clark, 'but then again, it kinda sounds like the same God damn thing.' Everyone laughed. Enos was so used to being overlooked that he didn't even know what to do when he was noticed.

'Calvin, guess what the hell I'm going to ask you now?' continued Clark.

'My favorite color is blue, Dad,' said Calvin.

'That's funny, but I was talking about your classes,' said Clark.

'I talked to this one girl in a... whatever class that was. Oh I remember... Heather,' said Calvin.

'You have a class named Heather?' said Sharon.

'Heather's a girl, Mom,' said Enos.

'Ooooo,' said Danny.

'Settle down, pee-wee,' said Calvin.

'You better be taking this seriously,' said Clark. He took a deep breath and smiled. 'Leroy, how you doing?'

'Nothing really happened today,' said Leroy. He seemed to smile and frown at the same time, and Clark seemed to read his mind.

'I don't give a rat's ass what those wastes of skins think, and you shouldn't either,' said Clark. 'There's always someone stronger than you. And if they misuse that strength it's their fault not yours. You have to fight them, Leroy, and never give up. You can't let your enemies define who you are.' Clark and Leroy looked into each other's eyes. It was only broken when Calvin playfully punched Leroy in the shoulder.

Susanna and Enos usually teased Leroy for all it was worth. But if they did it now they knew that their father would eat them alive. The respect Clark had for Leroy forced them to have it, too.

'Thanks Dad,' said Leroy.

'Susanna, what the hell happened to you today?' asked Clark.

'Some geek asked me out,' she said. He wasn't a geek, he was a handsome boy, but Susanna saw everyone as a geek unless they proved otherwise.

'Son of a bitch,' said Clark, 'what'd you say?'

'Oh it was the usual. He's all like, "You want to go somewhere?" and I said "Yeah, to your execution!"' They all laughed.

'How many times has a guy asked you out?' asked Clark.

'I've been getting them once a week or so recently,' she said.

'She's actually very pretty,' said Sharon, proudly.

Now in some ways Susanna liked being pretty, 'cause she used it to get a lot of what she wanted. But in some ways she couldn't stand it. Inside of her were thousands of ideas that a lot of people didn't understand. Some days they swarmed around in her head and beat the sides of her skull, and it made her sad that so few people understood them. Even her father didn't understand some of the things she talked about, and he knew calculus inside and out. So more often than not, when a boy came after her and he wanted a pretty girl and not those ideas, she didn't feel wanted at all; she felt rejected, and she had been rejected all her life.

You might be wondering why I'm saying Susanna was smart. You'll get some other examples later. But if you want one now, here it is.

When Susanna was in the second grade, the school decided to have some short plays, and they decided to have the kids write them and vote on which ones to do. For some reason Susanna's play was one of the winners.

Now with a bunch of parents and relatives huddled in a gym, the lights dimmed and her play began.

A little kid came out with a top hat made out of paper and big white bag with a dollar sign panted on it.

'Hello, I am Jay Gatsby. I am rich, but I am sad, because Daisy doesn't love me,' he said. Susanna walked out as Daisy.

Then another little boy walked out dressed like a hobo and said, 'I am Tom Joad and I am poor and unhappy.'

Then Jay Gatsby said, 'Hey old sport, I will give you my money if you get Daisy to love me.'

'OK,' said Tom Joad, and Gatsby gave Tom Joad that bag. 'Daisy, you should love Jay Gatsby.'

'No,' said Susanna, and she left 'cause that was her only line.

'That did not work. Tom Joad,' said Gatsby, 'I want my money back.'

'Finders keepers, Mark... I mean Databy... Gaty...' said Tom Joad.

Then another little kid walked out in a trench coat and with a wig of red hair and said, 'Hello Tom Joad, I am John Galt. Now that you are rich no one likes you, so you should come to Atlantis with me. ... Now we are in Atalantis... Atlantis.'

'Hey Tom Joad! I want my money back,' said Jay Gatsby.

'I will shoot you with nuclears, Jay Ga... Jay,' said Tom Joad.

'I will bomb you with nuclear bombs, too, Tom Joad,' said Gatsby.

Then they both said, 'Oh no, we will both die from nuclear bombs!'

Then a kid came out with a helmet on his head and said, 'I am David Bowman and I have returned from infinity with super powers to stop the nuclear bombs. Now the nuclear bombs have been stopped'

And they all said, 'The end.'

All the people in that gym started scratching their heads and looking at each other and were confused half to death.

One of the parents even said out loud, 'What the hell was that?'

Susanna's parents weren't there 'cause they were working, but her Uncle Cletus was there and he stood up clapping and yelled.

'That's my baby-girl!' he yelled. 'That was the cat's ass!'

When her parents got home they read her play, and they couldn't stop laughing their asses off.

'Stop laughing!' yelled Susanna. 'Stop it!'

'Sweetheart, we're sorry,' said Clark, trying to stop from laughing. 'It's very good, it is. It's just really weird, but good.'

'It's good, honey,' said Sharon, still laughing, 'I mean, I only read one of those books, but I don't think I finished it.'

Now as the family started to have their fill of that pork chop pizza and Clark looked at his daughter, he thought about his two major fears--two fears most fathers probably had. One was that she'd come home with a wheel barrel full of babies one day, drop them at his feet, and say, 'Here, take care of these things, or not. Whatever, I don't care. I'm going out on the town to get some more.' The other fear was that at the age of 90, she'd be living alone, never married and childless, in a rundown, disgustingly dirty old house, with an army of cats that she treated like children. And then the day she died all those cats would look at each other and say, thank God that stupid crazy bitch is dead come on guys let's eat her.

'You ever thought about going out with one of those boys?' said Clark.

'I just can't seem to. I... I... I don't know,' she said. Her thoughts were so big she couldn't find the words for them.

Calvin turned to Leroy to and said, 'Maybe she doesn't like boys.'

'Dude, shut up,' Susanna said to Calvin.

'I like boys,' said Danny.

'No you don't,' said Sharon.

'Look I'm just saying maybe you should talk to one,' said Clark. He then started backtracking, 'Once in a while, sometimes, maybe, at church, but stay the hell away from that Wilkins kid with the under bite.'

Susanna looked at him, realizing how hard it was for him to talk about this, but he was trying anyways, 'cause he wanted the best for her.

'Thanks Dad,' she said.

Now Clark thought that this meal was a waste, but he noticed it was so filling that there was a lot of leftovers, and so they were going to eat some of it tomorrow night and commit this blasphemy two nights in a row.

As they sat in front of the TV, Sharon sat down next to Clark, handed him a beer and opened one too. As he started to drink, he looked at his wife and started to notice something.

'Is that your first one today?' he asked her.

'What, beer? Uh... Yeah,' she answered.

Now for the longest time Clark was terrified that his new money was going to spoil his wife and turn her into a blood-sucking gold digger. But then he noticed she had started drinking a lot less, and the money that she wasn't spending on beer was starting to add up. In fact, when they still lived in that trailer they had an awful fight when Sharon got a job and spent all--well, mostly all--her money on beer. You see, when they lived in that trailer and Sharon woke up in her living room 'cause that was the only place for her and her husband to sleep, and she went into the bedroom where her four sons slept together and then she looked in the closet and saw her daughter sleeping in there to be alone, and she looked outside and saw a pile of junk, and she looked at her kitchen and the only food was half moldy bread from the food bank, and she looked at her clothes and the clothes of her children that they fished out of dumpsters behind clothing stores, she thought the only way she could look at this reality was to look at it drunk.

He put his arm around his wife and wondered if she even realized how much better she was doing. Now if he could he could just get her to stop smoking so much.

'Clark, I was wondering something,' she said, staring at the TV. 'Why is everybody so mean to Cliff Calvin? I think he's kinda smart.'

'Dude, I like, think he reads a lot of the same funny books Calvin does,' said Susanna.

'I'm going to funny book your butt one of these days, brat,' said Calvin.

'Why does Susanna get to watch TV and, we can't?' said Enos. He and Leroy were sitting at the kitchen table doing their homework. 'She has homework too.'

'Yeah, but she gets it done a lot faster,' said Clark.

'It's not fair, Dad,' said Enos.

'Life isn't fair Enos.' That was something Clark said all the time. Sometimes he thought it was bad and sometimes he thought it was good, but he thought it was the truth and he told his kids that all the time. 'You're lucky I let you do it there and see the TV from across the room. You don't start making progress and I'll make you do it in your room.'

And he was right when he was talking about Susanna. Some of her homework she would do on the bus on the ride to school, and she still got good grades.

Chapter 5

Now every Saturday morning a happy ritual took place. Enos, Danny, and Leroy ran to the living room and turned on the TV. They almost sat on the couch but their mother shoved them off so she could lie down, so they sat on the floor in front of it. Susanna was already up, staring out the window as she ate a bowl of cereal.

'Mom! Why didn't you get us up in time?' said Danny.

'Give me a break. I had a very rough night,' said Sharon.

'You mean you had a very drunk night,' said Enos. Sharon picked up an empty beer can and threw it at the kid's head. 'Mom!' he yelled.

'Just keep your mouth shut,' she said.

Leroy took the remote control and turned the TV on.

'The Smurfs, Leroy?' said Enos, grabbing the remote. 'The Smurfs are wimps. At least Heathcliff beats people up.'

Leroy changed it back. 'I like the Smurfs. They're always happy.'

Enos changed it again. 'Leroy, the only reason you like that show is 'cause you like Smurfette.'

Leroy answered, 'No it isn't.'

Susanna shouted from across the room, 'I don't think you like Smurfette, Leroy, I think you like Vanity Smurf.'

'Shut up Susanna!' said Danny, 'and you two nerf herders shut up! You do this every Saturday. You switch cartoons so much I can't understand anything that's going on! For once in my life I just want to watch a cartoon from start to finish, just once. You know what?! If one of you guys touch that remote control again! I'm going to CUT YOUR FINGERS OFF!'

Everyone stared at Danny.

'You know, he has a point,' said Sharon. They all then just sat quietly and watched the TV. Susanna looked back out the window, and what she saw made her smile. She walked over to the front door and slowly opened it, not making a sound.

'Sshhh,' she whispered. 'Come in.'

Sheena walked into the house and up behind the couch.

'So Leroy,' she said, 'you still watch cartoons?'

Leroy looked at her, and looked back at the TV.

'Oh no,' said Leroy picking up the remote, 'I was like, looking for something else.' He changed the channel, but it was all cartoons.

'Leroy!' yelled Danny, 'I'm going to kill you!' The little boy leaped on Leroy as Leroy stood up. Danny started punching and kicking and biting and grabbing and shaking any part of Leroy he could get his hands on. Leroy walked up to Sheena with that kid still hanging off his long strawberry blonde mullet.

'So uh, how yah doing?' said Leroy.

'I'm OK,' she said. 'You kinda look like you're in pain or something.'

'What, this guy? Leroy pointed to Danny. 'We're just playing around.'

'Look,' she said, 'it's OK if you watch cartoons. I watch He-man and the Smurfs sometimes.'

'The Smurfs, really?' said Leroy, 'I mean, that's Kool.'

'I just came over to see if you wanted to go to a movie,' said Sheena. 'I like to go early 'cause it's cheaper.'

'Yeah, I've done that too,' said Leroy, with Danny still trying to beat the hell out of him.

'Oh Leroy you got a little girlfriend,' said Sharon, just thrilled at seeing the two together.

'Look, I'm not his girlfriend,' said Sheena.

Sharon grabbed Danny off Leroy and set him down in front of the TV. Then she walked over to Sheena.

'You can tell me if you're his girlfriend,' she said. 'I'm fine with it.' Then Sharon leaned over to Sheena and whispered, 'Don't worry, I'm not a racist.' Sheena laughed out loud.

Now you might think Sharon said a stupid, horrible thing, but you would be wrong--well, maybe. And this is a really touchy subject, and if it makes you mad, I'm very sorry. I mean it. But you have to understand that Sharon Morgan said what she said 'cause she thought it needed to be said. And if you want to understand why she said it, you have to understand her father.

During the Great Depression Sharon's father's life had literally been saved by the kindness of absolute strangers. Now for the rest of his life he could never refuse to help someone. When Sharon was a little girl her father would bring absolute strangers into the tiny shack they lived in. And even though they had little food and little room, he would share as much as he could. He would share his food and his clothes, everything. But sometimes he put his life and the life of his family in absolute jeopardy. Depending on who he let in that shack, he had to be very careful about who knew that person was there. But he did it anyway, and the same story was repeated all over Oilville. No one knew how many times 'cause they were good at keeping secrets, and like I said before, if you want to look for the good times in history, look at the gaps in the timeline.

The ugly rumor was that Oilville was full of stupid racist rednecks. But the truth was more complicated than that. So when Sharon Morgan said what she said, she meant it.

'Mom, you are really embarrassing me,' said Leroy.

'I'm sorry, I'm just saying so,' said Sharon.

'Well, I'm not a racist, either,' said Sheena, laughing, 'so we have something in common. Come on, Leroy, we're gonna miss it.' She and Leroy started to walk out the door, and just before she left she looked back at Sharon. 'And I'm really not his girlfriend.'

At the movies Sheena and Leroy sat together and talked occasionally. Leroy thought about reaching out and grabbing her hand, but he didn't. His mind went back and forth between the movie and the girl.

As they walked out Leroy thought to himself that he really didn't understand a lot of what was in the movie and he was afraid to ask, but he asked Sheena anyway.

'Sheena, why did the preacher want to outlaw dancing?' he asked.

'Because he's a control freak, Leroy,' she said. 'People are always trying to control you everywhere you go. But you have to fight it, you have fight every time you can and any way you can. That's why I listen to the Dead Kennedys, 'cause when people hear that music they know that I don't want to be controlled.'

'I was just wondering 'cause at my church we dance all the time,' said Leroy. 'At my church the preacher dances.'

'They don't dance around with snakes at this church of yours, do they?' Sheena laughed.

'No, but some bats have snuck in there sometimes,' said Leroy.

'Leroy, you're just so innocent sometimes that I just want to dirty you up,' Sheena laughed. 'But platonically. You ever listen to the Dead Kennedys?'

'No, I want to but I never got around to it,' said Leroy. 'I like the Ramones though.'

'You have to like the Ramones,' she said.

'I really like, "Sheena is a punk rocker,"' he said as they both started laughing. Leroy summoned up his courage and started to sing, 'Sheena is a punk rocker, Sheena is a punk rocker, Sheena is punk rocker now...'

Sheena laughed and said, 'Yes she is, yes she is.'

Leroy stopped singing.

'You have to like the Ramones,' she said. 'The Ramones started it all. For the most part. Have you ever listened to the Velvet Underground or the Modern Lovers?'

Chapter 6

Now in his tender young life Leroy had already worked four jobs. He was an apple picker, a hog slopper (and those hogs scared the hell out of him), a janitor, and a dish washer. Leroy hated work; he hated it almost as much as he hated high school. And he wasn't really that good a worker. He wasn't even that hard working, but he worked hard at working hard. And even though his parents didn't tell him to get a job recently, he decided to get one. Leroy felt nervous when he didn't have a job. And he felt relieved when he did have one, as much as he hated it.

One day Leroy was walking down the street and saw a burger restaurant with a sign that said,

‘HELP WANTED
WILL HIRE ANYONE
PLEASE!’

Well, at least they said please, Leroy thought. So the next day he was walking to that store and Davy ran up to him.

‘You know, I was thinking, you know that one girl Emily?’ said Davy. ‘I think you could totally hook up with her if I told her this other girl likes you, dude.’

‘I kinda like Sheena,’ said Leroy.

‘Oh yeah, that’s right, how’s it going with her?’ asked Davy.

‘I don’t know, we, like, talk a lot and we’ve kissed a couple times but she keeps saying she’s not my girlfriend.’

‘Yeah I’ve, like totally, met girls like that. I don’t know what’s going on there. That’s really something I’d like to ask a psychiatrist about,’ replied Davy, ‘but I just wouldn’t get worked up about it, man. If you really like her, just hang out with her, and enjoy what you can get. Words like that don’t really matter dude, it’s what people do that matters.’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ said Leroy, ‘I never thought of it like that. That’s a good idea.’

‘I don’t know man, that’s just what I would do,’ replied Davy.

Well, they walked and talked till they got to the burger joint, next to a row of palm trees. Then they looked up at a big fiberglass burger on top of a fiberglass paper cup, and there was also a big sign that said,

‘QUEEN CALI BURGERS.’

As they walked in the place they saw rows of tables, a counter with a register separating the kitchen from the dining hall and a row of video games: Pac-Man and Miss Pac-Man, which were pretty much the same thing, along with Popeye and Donkey Kong, which were also pretty much the same thing. On one wall was a painting of Queen Calafia.

There were also more people in there than in China.

Leroy waited patiently, with Davy talking to him the whole time, as the line moved up to the register. Leroy couldn't help but notice the man behind the register. He was short but had big arms, a bald spot and a mustache and was the friendliest, kindest, happiest person Leroy had seen in almost ever. As Leroy got to the counter the man spoke.

'Hey guys. How's it going, dudes?' the man said, as workers ran back and forth behind him. 'Welcome to, Queen Cali's. Everything here is farmed in California, made by Californians and made for Californians and our welcomed guest.'

'Actually sir,' said Leroy, 'I'm not sure if you have to fill out a form, or write a resume. I don't even know how to do that. But I just wanted to know if there's any chance I could possibly get a jo...'

'Thank God!' interrupted the man. 'Both of you get your asses back here now!' Davy wasn't even trying to get a job but he suddenly got one without even a word, so he figured what the hell.

Now Queen Cali's wasn't a McDonalds. There was one of those up the street and it had twice the business Queen Cali had, but that was OK 'cause there was more than enough to go around. In fact if anything, McDonalds gave them more business. In that town a lot of people driving home from McDonalds looked over and thought maybe they could get one more thing at this other store. A lot of times Queen Cali's workers would see bags from other stores in people's cars as they drove through the drive-through. Sometimes the parents wanted to go to a burger stand and the kids wanted to go to a Pizza Hut. And sometimes the kids wanted burgers and the parents wanted Chinese.

But unlike McDonalds Queen Cali's served burgers that were almost the size of pancakes and curly fries that you could almost stretch out to a foot. And unlike McDonalds, there was only one Queen Cali's in the world, and it was owned by Jesus Coria (the short bald guy) and another guy that was an accountant, who hardly showed up at the place. But that was OK 'cause Coria liked his money, his accounting skills, and his ability to talk the bank into giving loans.

'OK, listen up you fatherless sons of whores,' Leroy started to think Mr. Coria saved all his smiles for the customers, 'this right now is your orientation! You're gonna work hard and you're gonna work long! And you're gonna do everything that pops into my head before I even say it. If I want my balls scratched, you're gonna do it! But if you think that means you can walk around like the brain dead robots you are! you're wrong! I don't want to hear any stupid questions! You don't know what to do! Use what little common sense you have and figure it out!'

He threw them two T-Shirts saying *Queen Cali's* on 'em.

'And one more thing, don't either of you dare steal anything. I mean money, I mean food and I mean the God damn shirts you're wearing. They

belong to me. If you even think of breathing too much of my air I'm going take you out back rip off your dorks, use them to beat you within an inch of your life, steal your money and use it to pay a homeless guy to rape you!' Even though Jesus Coria had the same name as our Lord and Savior, some of his employees swore he was the other guy.

'You, possum eater!' Coria yelled pointing at Leroy. 'Get on that register. You, cat eater!' he pointed at Davy. 'Get back on that grill.'

Cat eater? This was one of the worst things that had ever been said to Davy, so he went right up to that man and looked him in the eye and said, 'Look man, that was really uncalled for.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, your majesty,' said Coria, 'did I offend the princess of China?! Do you want a job or do you want someone to scratch that itch up your ass?'

Now if you're insulted by Jesus Coria, I'm very sorry, I really am. But you have to understand that there wasn't a racist bone in his body. He was just a mean son of a bitch.

Now unlike Leroy, Davy only had had one other job in his whole life. It was a job at his mother's office, but if you think that he was lazy then you're wrong. Doing as good in school as he did was as hard as any job. And even though he was smarter than most other kids, he still spent days without sleep trying to understand some things. And though you may think that Leroy with his experience would do better at that job than Davy, it didn't seem to work out that way.

Leroy had an awful time trying to figure out the computerized register, 'cause he had never worked with money or a computer before. And to top it all off, Mr. Coria hovered over him, yelling at the top of his lungs at every other mistake.

'Sir, I've never used stuff like this before,' said Leroy.

'Just press the buttons!' said Coria. 'What's the matter? Too much moonshine in that head of yours to press a button?'

'Uh, um, uh.... Five, six, eighth.'

'Leroy!' yelled Coria. 'Can't you count, you stupid banjo picker?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Leroy, don't forget to suggestive sell. People don't always know what they want,' yelled Coria.

Leroy went to get more cups as another worker came and started using the register.

'Leroy!' yelled Coria. 'Don't let anyone else touch that money! If there's half a penny missing I'm going to rip off your arm and leg and sew them back on in reverse!'

'Why did you put him on the register? Just so you could yell at him all day? He's not going to get it,' said Davy.

'If I want your opinion I'll open a fortune cookie,' yelled Coria, 'and hurry the hell up with that burger.'

'Hey,' said Davy, 'patience is a virtue, dude.'

'Bullshit,' said Coria, 'the best things come to those who refuse to wait.' He then turned back to Leroy. 'Now get back to work, Bo Duke, your uncle Jesse isn't here to save you.'

'Sorry sir.'

Hours later the business let up and Davy and Leroy talked to each other while leaning up against a wall.

'You know Leroy,' said Davy, 'I've been thinking. How much money do you think is in that register?'

'I don't know, almost, around, maybe, ten hundred dollars, I think,' said Leroy. 'We've been really busy.'

'Did you ever look at the list of employees?' asked Davy.

'Yeah, I think there're only six people that work here including us,' said Leroy.

'Leroy, don't you get it?' asked Davy.

'Yeah, we're really shorthanded,' said Leroy.

'No man. I mean yes, but--look, he can't fire us, Leroy,' said Davy. Leroy looked confused. 'Just listen, with all the money he's making and how little employees he has, he's never going to fire us. It's totally like, supply and demand, dude. We can do whatever the hell we want and he'll never fire us. Man like, the only way he'll fire us is if we go into the dining room and take a grumpy on the floor, and maybe not even then.'

'Well, I don't think we should chance it, man,' said Leroy. 'Besides, I like using the bathroom.'

'Dude, I'm going to try something. Watch this.'

Davy calmly walked to grill, made a burger, and then walked over right next to Mr. Coria, and started eating. Mr. Coria did a double-take.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?!' yelled Coria. 'That's coming out of your pay!'

'No it's not,' said Davy.

'You put that down right now! Or I'll...'

'You'll what? Promise to maim me in some ridiculous, improbable way, but never do it and just run around yelling, like an idiot?' said Davy.

'Listen up, Chuck Norris, you want a job or not?' said Coria.

'Ok look man, you're stupid man, like Chuck Norris isn't even Asian,' said Davy. 'And whenever you want to turn that key that's your business, but I'm gonna finish this sandwich and then get back to work.'

'AAAAHHHH,' yelled Coria, walking away.

'Man, like I don't know about this, Davy,' said Leroy.

'Just relax man, we totally got it made.'

Some time later Leroy was having an awful time trying to help a customer.

'There's cheese on this?! You never told me that!' he said.

'Uh, you ordered a cheese burger,' said Leroy.

'And these tomatoes are filled with some kind of seed! What do you think I am? A bird!?' that son of a bitch said.

'I think those are tomato seeds,' said Leroy

'Are you some kind of idiot?! Everything here is wrong!' he said.

'I'm really sorry, sir,' said Leroy.

But Davy ran up to the front and started yelling back at the son of a bitch.

'You know what, man? You're an asshole, man! He read that order back to you five or six times and you didn't say shit. Here's your money. We got other people to help,' he said.

'What the hell?' said that son of a bitch.

'Ignore him, Leroy,' said Davy, 'and help the next guy.' And he was scared half to death but Leroy did just that, as that son of a bitch customer left in a huff.

'What the hell did you just do?' said Coria, running up to the counter.

'I don't know dude,' said Davy. 'What are you going to do? Huh? "Go ahead punk, make my day."'

Coria put his hands on his head and walked away, screaming.

Now if you think that these boys were being lazy you're wrong. They made more food and more money and worked harder than anyone there. In fact, they cleaned that place from top to bottom, and one night while they were sweeping under the counters, something weird happened. A hot dog rolled out, and the boys were puzzled 'cause they didn't sell hot dogs.

They then walked up to Mr. Coria and asked him about it.

'Mr. Coria,' asked Davy, 'did you ever sell hot dogs here?'

'NO no no no no no,' he answered, 'but this was a hot dog stand in the 60s.'

The boys looked at each other, stunned.

Later that night Coria walked around a corner to find the two boys playing video games.

'What the hell are you frog licking slackers doing!? You're on the clock!' he yelled.

'Dude,' said Davy, 'there's no customers, and the place is clean, and you know what man, I'm kinda tired. I got a couple of lives left and I'm going to finish this game. Don't worry, we got our jobs as good as done.'

Coria put his hands on his head and walked away, screaming.

'God, I can't believe that worked,' said Leroy and he started to smile.

'Yeah man, it's Kool,' said Davy. 'I think after a while working here, I can finally get my car fixed up. I thought that was never gonna happen. We just need to be smart and use some moderation, but this job's gonna be a cake walk, man.'

'Yeah, I kinda like it here,' said Leroy.

'You stupid pig farmer,' yelled Coria from the back, counting Leroy's register. 'You lost twenty bucks!'

'Sorry Mr. Coria,' said Leroy.

The boys worked there for several days in the same fashion and drove Mr. Coria out of his mind on several occasions. But one of the things that Coria insisted on was that Leroy worked the register, and every so often he took him to the back office and made him learn to use a computer.

'Mr. Coria, I don't know how to type, and I've never used a computer. I don't even know how they work,' said Leroy.

'What are you, stupid? Nobody knows how they work,' said Coria. 'For all I care, Santa's elves are in this thing, but you're going to learn how to use it!'

'But why do you even need a computer to run a restaurant?' said Leroy.

'Organization,' said Coria. 'I'll have a list of all my profits, a list of all my cost, all my inventory. You know how much money I lose because I order too much or too little food?'

'No,' said Leroy.

'Of course you don't,' said Coria. 'No one can, but with this thing I can figure it out. Just with increased efficiency I can make a profit.'

'I don't think I can use it,' said Leroy.

'God damn it, you stupid hillbilly,' Coria said, 'you're gonna learn it or I'm gonna put my hand down your mouth, pull your butt up your throat, and make you take a crap in your own mouth!'

'Sorry sir.'

'Besides, I've never used a computer, until a couple months ago. I didn't even graduate high school till I was 30,' said Coria. 'And if I can learn how to use one, you can. It's not as complicated as you think; just press tab and write in the number from the list, tab and write in the number from the list.'

'Wow Mr. Coria, that's the nicest thing you ever said to me.' It was the only nice thing he ever said to him.

'God damn sheep raper,' said Coria.

One day a customer came up to the drive-through.

'Hello?' the guy yelled into the box. And that box talked back.

'Rero, rhat roud rou rike ro ray.'

'Yeah like, zoinks man, do you like want some like, Scooby snacks, man?' That guy in the car just started laughing.

'What the hell are you doing?' yelled Coria as the two boys spoke into the drive through microphone.

'What's the big deal?' said Davy. 'The guy's laughing.'

'That was kinda funny,' said the guy in on the drive-through.

'Yah man and like, you never know, people might start coming here 'cause we joke around like this. It's just our way of shaking a guy's hand,' argued Davy.

'You know, that might be pushing it,' said the guy outside.

They finished the guy's order with Coria hovering over them, and he started yelling as soon as the customer was gone.

'OK, you little sons of bitches! You went too far this time!' Coria held up an apple with a hole in the side and ashes where the stem should be, and if you don't know what that is, you're a nerd. 'I found this is the fridge. Whose is it!?' The two boys pointed at each other.

'In my store! On my property! On my time!' He threw the apple at the closed drive-through window and it exploded all over the place.

'You should have ate that thing,' said Davy.

'I wasn't hungry,' said Leroy.

'How could you not be hungry?' asked Davy.

'I just had all those fries and my tooth hurts...' said Leroy.

'You should have thrown it away,' said Davy.

'My mom said I shouldn't throw food away when there're little starving black kids in Yugoslavia,' said Leroy.

'Both of you shut the hell up!' yelled Coria.

'I thought your culture was open to stuff like that,' said Davy.

'You are without a doubt, the worst, slimiest, waste of skin, good for only crapping, blood sucking sponges that I ever have given a dime to!' He stared at them and breathed like a bull ready to charge and said, 'Leroy, you want to be a manager?'

'Well I don't know, I shoul...' Leroy said as Coria interrupted.

'Let me rephrase that: you're going to be a manager,' Coria said.

'Hey wait!' said Davy. 'Why does he get to be a manager and I don't? We were hired at the same time.'

'I don't know about you, man,' said Coria. 'You're too, too, too, too, God damn smart to be a manager.' Jesus Coria was a good judge of character, even though he couldn't explain it all the time. In fact he had been planning to make Leroy a manager since almost the very moment he hired him. Coria trusted Leroy 'cause somehow he knew he was honest--well, for the most part. That's why he had Leroy learn the register and computer as much as he did.

'Ha-ha-ha,' said Leroy, pointing at Davy.

'OK, OK,' said Davy, 'but if you're gonna make Leroy a manager you should give him a raise.'

'WHAT!' yelled Coria.

'And you should give me a raise, to compensate me for being passed over for promotion,' said Davy.

'WHAT!' yelled Coria. 'That doesn't even make any sense!'

'How's this for making sense?' said Davy. 'Come on Leroy, I heard Woolworth's is hiring. Good luck running this place by yourself, Jesus.' And those two boys started to walk out the door.

'No, no, no!' yelled Coria, 'come on man, I keep trying to call people in and I can only get hold of Mickey. He keeps yelling about ninjas and he sounds like he's overdosing or something.'

'You need to spend money to make money, Mr. Coria,' said Davy. 'We aren't a charity, man.'

'God damn it!' yelled Coria. 'Fine, you got a raise. But nothing too big.'

'No, nothing too big,' said Davy, 'we're not unreasonable. Just bigger than Woolworth's.'

'And you should get us better cleaning supplies,' said Leroy.

'Yeah dude,' said Davy.

'Yeah, we need better shit, so we can do our shit better,' said Leroy.

'OK, OK,' said Coria.

'And you should be nicer to us,' said Leroy.

'Not a chance,' Coria said.

'Just as well man,' said Davy to Leroy. 'You can't take, please and thank yous, to the bank. Need to pick your battles, man.' He playfully punched Leroy on the shoulder and they high-fived each other. 'Workers unite,' said Davy.

'God damn it. Leroy!' yelled Coria, as he took out an envelope, and handing it to him. 'I want you to guard this with your life. I wrote the combination to the safe and the code to the computer in there, and don't let anyone know what it is. Especially this little con artist.' He pointed at Davy. 'I'm going to go home. I haven't had a night off in a month. But if anything goes wrong, I'm going to drag you two idiots down to San Quentin myself!

'I'm gonna get my coat, and I hired some guy to help you,' said Coria as he walked back to the office with the computer.

Leroy started to giggle.

'What?' said Davy.

'You know, I never got a raise before,' said Leroy, 'and I never worked at a place where I wasn't afraid of getting fired.'

'Yeah man,' said Davy.

Then the new employee walked out and it was Calvin, believe or not.

'All right man,' said Leroy, 'I'm a manager now, now so you have to do what I say.' Leroy handed Calvin a brush and bottle of soap. 'You have to clean the bathroom.'

And Calvin just dropped those things on the floor and said, 'Not gonna happen, pee-wee.' Davy just laughed.

As Coria walked to the front door, Leroy ran up to him.

'Mr. Coria,' said Leroy, 'this guy won't do what I say.'

'Welcome to my world,' said Coria as he walked out the door.

Chapter 7

One night when Clark Morgan came home, he grabbed a beer and sat down with his wife. She was watching the Dukes of Hazard, her favorite show except for maybe Cheers or Donahue or Sherlock Holmes (starring Jeremy Brett and hosted by Vincent Price). But as Clark kept watching with her, he started to notice something.

'Isn't this the same episode they had on last night?' asked Clark. 'Yeah, it is. See? Look, there's that alien Boss Hog was trying to catch. They must think we'll watch anything.' He went to grab the control and Sharon stopped him.

'No Clark, I want to watch it,' she said, 'besides it's not a repeat.'

'What do you mean?' said Clark. Sharon pointed to a box under the TV.

'A VCR,' said Clark, 'I really wish you'd stop buying things without telling me. Plus you bought this show.'

'I didn't buy the show, I recorded it. You can record anything you want with these things, and then watch it whenever you want. You don't even have to be here when you record it. You can program it. It'll turn on all on its own.'

Now a lot of the things at Clark's job were kinda hard to explain in one discussion. And they seemed remarkably hard to explain to Sharon, even though she'd often say that she understood him completely. But when she told Clark how to program that VCR, he couldn't follow it.

'Sharon, how did you do that?' he asked.

'Look, look, look,' she explained, 'just press program and press a number, see, see, see. See those numbers flashing on top of the clock? That's how you know it's working. No, no, no, you're setting the clock again. Give me that.' She took the remote away and typed away at that thing.

'Look,' she said, 'I'll put it for a couple minutes from now. Just watch, this is Kool.' She turned the VCR off.

'Sharon, we're staring at static,' said Clark.

'I just want to show you how it works,' she said, 'It'll just take a couple of minutes.' They sat there.

'You know what, Clark?' she said. 'I never thought I'd like Tabasco sauce that much, but lately I've been putting it on everything. Potatoes, eggs, toast, Cheez-its-- I went to this burger place one day and brought Tabasco sauce with me and I put it on my fries. This guy said I shouldn't bring other food in there but I just put it on really fast and put the stuff away, 'cause what's he gonna do once it's already on there?'

'Then I went to the salon and this one lady there was bragging about all the exotic fish she had, and I thought, you know, what's the most exotic fish there is that I bet she doesn't have? An alligator. This guy on Donahue had an alligator in his basement.'

'My God Sharon,' said Clark, 'we're not going to get an alligator.'

'Oh, you mean 'cause we don't have a basement?'

'Sharon.'

'You know what I've been doing lately?' said Sharon. 'I'm putting tomato juice in my beer again, and then I thought to put Tabasco sauce in the beer. Do they do that with Bloody Marys?'

This whole time they were staring at that screen with nothing but static on it.

'You know what else tastes good?' said Sharon. 'Milk and Pepsi, like on Laverne and Shirley. It tastes really good and I never thought it would, but it did. It makes the glass pretty dirty but I mean you have to wash it, anyway.'

'You know what's really good that I never thought about until I started mixing things? Worcestershire sauce and ketchup. You know, next time we have pizza I want to put that on the pizza, or maybe I want to put Tabasco sauce on it. Do you think I could put both? Would those go good together at all? Clark what do you think?'

'I am, uh, uh um...' was all Clark could spit out before the VCR turned itself on.

'Oh look at it, Clark.' The TV picture started working too. 'They should make more things like this--you know, stuff that can turn itself on and turns itself off. We could live our whole life and never touch an on-off switch.'

'Sharon, I'm still not sure you should have bought this thing,' said Clark.

'But Clark, you know how we have a hard time getting the kids to do their homework when they get home, 'cause they always put those God damn cartoons on right after school?'

'Yeah,' said Clark.

'We can use this to tape the cartoons and say they can watch them later if they do their homework. We can even tape football games when they play them during church.' Now you got to admit, that isn't a bad argument.

'But the money, Sharon,' said Clark.

'Clark, this thing pays for itself,' she said.

'How?!' said Clark.

'When we watch what we recorded, we can fast forward through the commercials, so then we won't want to buy the stuff they show in them.' Now I'm going to have to think about that one.

'What!?' said Clark.

'Besides, I'm tired of just watching what's on TV when they put it on, at whatever time it's on,' she said. 'I want to watch what I want to watch, when I want to watch it.' Maybe there's a point to that.

'Sharon it just seems indulgent, maybe,' said Clark.

'Clark, just think about this,' she said. 'You could watch the Tonight Show in the morning before you go to work.'

'Well, I do hate the Today Show,' said Clark.

Well, those next couple of days Clark was almost scared out of his mind after the family went on a spending spree, but he felt almost powerless, because although Sharon might not seem that bright to you, she could argue like a lawyer promised the moon.

If anything, Sharon's taste in furniture got even more bizarre. One day Clark came home to find a coffee table that looked like a polished slab of granite on metal legs, and an armless ebony chair that just looked like three rectangles bolted together. On the front lawn Sharon put a plastic flamingo, but instead of being pink it was white with spots, like a Dalmatian.

One day Sharon came home with a big box and set it on the Rubik's cube table on one side of the living room.

'God damn it, Sharon, what the hell?' the man said, and he was about to start the biggest argument they had had in a long time, that would end with him throwing that credit card in the air and blasting it with his shot gun, no matter what that woman said.

'Clark, you help make these things and you don't even have one,' she said. 'Do you really think Samuel Colt never fired a gun?' Sharon opened the box, and it was a computer. And that threw him back. He had never even thought about his work life crossing into his home life.

'OK Sharon,' he said, thinking he was clever, 'you get it to work and I'll let you keep it.'

'Leroy!' Sharon yelled. She always got Leroy to do jobs for her, but he wasn't as much help as she thought he would be.

'Um... hum... uh,' he said, looking at the wires for what seemed like forever.

'Step aside,' said Susanna, stepping forward, with Enos close behind. And those two kids argued back and forth like a Republican dog and a Democrat cat but they got it working in no time. And Clark and Sharon witnessed a new trend that parents were experiencing all around the world. If you ever have problems with a computer, just get married and have a kid or two, and they'll run that thing better than most people you'd pay to do it.

Once the thing was up and running, Enos started typing up one of his school reports.

'Look Enos, you made some spelling mistakes,' said Sharon. 'You're going to have to rewrite it.'

'Not all of it, Mom,' said Enos, as he just pressed the arrow keys, moving the cursor over what he had already typed. He then just re-wrote the mistakes without re-writing the report.

'They should have made typewriters like that,' she said. When Enos was done, Susanna sat in front of it.

'Man, I like, want to try this one program I swiped from school,' she said.

'Did what from school? You little hell raiser,' said her father.

'It's totally non-egregious, Dad, I just copied it, OK? Don't freak out,' she answered as she put a floppy disk in.

'Look, it can solve algebra problems,' she said. 'It can even graph them, as long as they're not too complicated.' Soon she and Enos were writing down and solving math problems and testing them in the computer and arguing over what the answer was going to be. Clark sat back and watched his two kids and he realized that learning this complicated skill that almost singlehandedly pulled his family out of poverty was being turned into a game by this device.

'Why do you write your Bs so funny?' said Enos.

'So I don't confuse them with the sixes like you always do, nimrod,' said Susanna.

'Don't do that, I can't do ones like that,' said Enos.

'Like what?' said Susanna.

'Exponents over two,' said Enos.

'Look,' said Susanna, 'if you're a genetically modern human of sound mind and body, and willing to take the time to learn, you can do any math. Sometimes you don't even need those. You just have to believe there's an answer to every math problem. You just have to have faith.'

'What's the next one?' Clark said, picking up one of their papers. 'It's going to be X equals negative five, negative two, and plus five and the Y's gonna be a negative three.'

They typed it in and the kids turned to him.

'Wow, you're right, Dad,' said Enos, as Susanna smiled.

'Did you do that all in your head?' said Susanna.

'I've seen a million like that one,' he said, smiling, 'besides, maybe your old man isn't the stupid redneck you thought he was.' And they laughed.

One day Enos and Susanna came home with another device that they hooked up to the computer and then they took the damn phone receiver and hooked that up the device. With Susanna over his shoulder, Enos typed at the computer.

Sharon walked over to see what the hell they were doing. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'We got a modem and hooked the computer up to the phone line,' said Susanna. 'Right now Enos is talking to a guy in West Germany.'

'No way,' said Sharon. 'Do you think he knows that guy Falco?'

Enos typed and read it back. 'He says he thinks Falco is actually Austrian, but he still likes him.'

Sharon pushed Enos off the computer. 'C'mon, I want to try.' And Sharon sat down at the computer and started typing.

The kids looked at the screen at what their mother had typed.

'Sorry about that nuclear bomb, but it was war and sometimes crazy shit happens.'

Sometime after that Leroy and Calvin came home with something similar to the computer that they hooked it up to the TV. They called it an Atari.

Clark couldn't be more against it. First of all it was too much like a computer and they already had one of those things. Second of all, all it seemed to do was play games. And third of all it tied up the damn TV. He even thought about letting his no TV in your rooms rule go to get them out of the living room, but he thought that the video game would just make them bigger shut-ins than a TV. But anyway, they paid for it with their own money so at least they weren't spending his money like Sharon was doing.

But for some reason one day he picked up the joy stick and couldn't put it down. Soon the whole family was surrounding him, telling him how to save that girl at the top of the screen. In both ears all he could hear was 'Dad Dad Dad,' and 'Bla Bla Bla.'

One time after he was killed again, he turned to the family, especially the kids, and said, 'OK guys, can you just tell me why the bad guy is a damn gingerbread man?'

'Dad,' said Danny, 'it's a gorilla.'

For the longest time Clark did all he could to be his old frugal self and hold his family back. But the bills weren't as bad as he thought they would be and when he went to work one day he got a raise. Soon Clark decided to indulge in something himself. He decided to buy a car, a Nissan Sentra. It was used 'cause he was still frugal and to tell you the truth, it was one of the ugliest cars he had ever seen. But Clark was modest. And he thought that between him and his wife and his older children, of driving age, having the VW and the Nissan was a good idea.

The only indulgence that Sharon tried to embrace that never took with the Morgans was cable TV. The day the cable guy came and put the box on the TV, he turned it on and the first thing Clark Morgan heard was, '...an amazing transformation takes place, he becomes Bannaman, champion of the moon!'

Clark shook his head and said to himself sarcastically, 'Yeah, this is money well spent.'

Clark felt most of the shows were just the same the old stuff, especially since most of them were repeats. The only channel they seemed to watch was MTV, and that was mostly the kids, as it bored both the parents to tears. Nevertheless, Sharon wanted to keep it, and Clark thought she might win this thing, like the other arguments, until he got the idea to let Sharon be in charge of the bill every month. And as absentminded as she was, she missed that bill every month till she finally gave up on it.

After that the indulgences seemed to level off for the most part. Clark started putting his foot down more, before Sharon really did come back

with an alligator, and she started having trouble knowing what to buy. Maybe her VCR argument worked after all.

The only exception was when Sharon bought a sprinkler toy for Danny and when he set the damn thing up, he decided to do it in living room. But she whooped him good for it.

The Morgans never got in dept. But knowing they could go out and earn it all back if they did, took the edge off.

Chapter 8

Well one day at Queen Cali's, Mr. Coria was so desperate for workers that he hired two guys that only knew two words in English: 'what' and 'huh.' That whole day he spent showing the guys around the store and trying to read to them out of an English to Spanish dictionary. As he walked by Davy, the boy said something.

'Mr. Coria you really don't speak any Spanish?' asked Davy.

'I'm a little out of practice OK!' Coria snapped back. 'I guess you can carry on a full conversation with General Tojo!'

'Look man,' said Davy, 'that's stupid, I'm like, not even Japanese, and that guy's dead. I mean, what am I supposed to do? Get a Japanese translator and a Ouija board?'

'If you want, I can send you to meet him face to face,' said Coria.

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' replied Davy. He walked over to Leroy.

'What do you think those guys are talking about when they start talking in Spanish to each other?' Davy asked Leroy.

'I don't know, man,' said Leroy.

'You ever wonder what English would sound like if you didn't speak English?' asked Davy. 'I asked my mom about that and she found it hard to explain.'

'OK, look at em talk right now, I know what their saying,' Davy continued.

"Hey man, remember that peanut brittle I gave you the other day?"

"Then the other says, "Whatever, that sucked man, you put all those springy snakes in there."

"That didn't suck, that was awesome. I wish I could try it on Davy and Leroy, but they just heard us talking about it so it won't work."

"Yeah but those guys don't speak Spanish so they probably don't know what we're talking about."

"Oh yeah, I got that peanut brittle can in the car I'll go get it."

'And that's what those guys are saying,' concluded Davy.

'Leroy, Leroy.' They looked over to see Susanna leaning over the counter. Her eyes met Davy's and after a split second she glared, and looked at Leroy. 'Leroy, get me some free food.'

'I don't know, Susanna,' he said, 'I mean, we steal so much already.'

'Just go back there and get it, you wussy nimrod,' she whispered harshly.

'Shhh,' said Leroy. Coria came up and put his hands on the counter.

'I just hope these guys got a clue what to do,' said Coria.

'They speak Spanish?' asked Susanna.

'Yeah,' said Coria. Susanna smiled.

'Sir, I can speak Spanish pretty good,' she said.

'Really!? You want a job?' asked Coria.

'I don't know,' said Susanna, 'I usually don't work as much as my brother 'cause unlike him, I actually have a chance of doing good in school.'

'Hey look,' said Coria, 'flexible hours, and I'll make you a manager, right off the bat.'

Susanna licked her lips.

'OK,' she said.

'Wait, you're making her a manager right away?' asked Davy.

'She has special skills,' said Coria.

'Your sister speaks Spanish?' said Davy.

'Yeah, she's always showing off, too,' said Leroy. 'It's really annoying.'

Soon Susanna was walking around that store with Coria talking to her and her talking to those two guys who only knew 'what' and 'huh.' Davy looked at her and thought there had to be an angle to this, and Leroy looked at her and knew there was; he knew the kind of bitch she was.

After the Spanish speaking guys had their fill for a while, Susanna walked right up to Davy.

'OK, I got a job for you,' she said to Davy. 'The dumpster is full. We need someone to make some room by getting in there and jumping up and down on the garbage.'

'Are you kidding me?!' he yelled back. 'There's broken glass in there and God knows what.'

'You're not going to do it barefoot, are you?!' replied Susanna.

'Can't you get someone else?' said Davy.

'Just do it,' the girl said. And as she said that she leaned forward with her pretty body, thrust forward her pretty head, sneered with her big lips, bared her teeth and looked that boy right in the eye with her pale blue-gray eyes and the pupils looked like angry little black dots that could have shot lasers. And inside Davy awoke a primal caveman, bee hive mentality that exists in every man that isn't a psychopath. It told that boy that the prettier, the smarter, and the angrier a girl was, he had to do whatever the hell she said.

Davy walked outside and looked at that big stupid metal box full of garbage. What the hell was in that girl to make him do this? He hadn't been that intimidated by a girl for the longest time. Part of him thought maybe he had never really knew what a girl was until now, and part of him felt that maybe that creature with the big lips wasn't a girl. He climbed into that stupid thing and did his stupid job.

When Davy came back in the store his shoes and his pants, almost up to his crotch, were covered in wet muck that could only be described as yuck. Susanna looked so happy and proud that you'd think she just discovered Jimmy Hoffa's body in Atlantis with the secrets to cold fusion.

'That's it,' Davy said, 'I'm never going to do something like that again.'

'Well, you know what?' she said. They started to pace around each other in circles like two soaring hawks ready to fight. 'You have to do

everything I say, 'cause I'm your boss, and if you don't like it, then you can take it up with my boss.'

'You better watch it, or I might,' said Davy. 'I'll go up to that guy and tell him it's either me or her, man.'

'You are such a dork,' she said. 'Coria will never fire me 'cause I'm the best employee he has.'

Now if you worked there you might be inclined to believe her, 'cause all day the angry Mr. Coria seemed like he got a pet angrier little redhead dog.

There was one employee that couldn't do a lick of work unless he was singing at the top of his lungs, and he was so God damn big hardly anyone gave him crap for it. One time when Susanna was taking an order on the register that singing chef walked by behind her.

'...I just called, to say, how much I care, aaare aaare aaare, yes I do.'

She turned around and snapped, 'Would you shut up you moronic, half witted, tone deaf, nimrod! I can't tell what this nimrod wants.'

'I'm sorry,' said the singing chef.

'Nimrod?' said the customer.

'Am I really tone deaf?'

'Both of you shut up,' said Susanna, she pointed to the customer. 'Buy something now!'

And there was one girl that worked there that took Davy's strategy to the extreme. As soon as she got to work she'd make herself a meal and just sit down to eat it. When Susanna saw this, she walked over to the girl, threw her fries all over the place, threw her burger on the floor, stomped on it and broke the girl's tray over her knee. Then she yelled right in the girl's ear.

'You're not getting paid to make your fat! Ass! Fatter!'

That girl was so shocked she ran away in tears.

But Davy sure as hell wasn't going to run away in tears. But when that little girl looked him in the eyes and said, 'You are such a dork, Coria will never fire me 'cause I'm the best employee he has,' Mr. Coria burst in and started yelling.

'You psycho trailer park princess!' he yelled. 'If you think you can turn this place upside down and run it like your ma and pa's meth lab, you got another thing coming!'

'Like, what the hell, dude?' she said unfazed. 'What are you spazzing about?'

'Those two guys you've been training,' said Coria, 'Simon and Rodolfo.'

'What about them, man?' asked Susanna.

'Those guys have been putting chocolate on the burgers, mayonnaise in the shakes, giving away free food, burning boxes out back, putting burgers in the fryer, putting fries on the grill, and God only knows what the hell they were doing on the roof!' Coria was yelling at the top of his lungs.

'Look those guys speak in a really weird dialect that I'm having a lot of trouble with,' Susanna said. 'I'm doing the best I can, and if I worked at the U.N. I'd be making a lot more money than I am now.'

'You,' said Coria, 'you are a manipulative, conniving Lex Luthor, in the body of a crazy hillbilly bitch!'

'Leroy!' yelled Susanna, making Leroy emerge from his hiding place, 'Leroy, you can't let this asshole talk to me like that.'

'You know sir,' said Leroy, 'you really shouldn't ...'

'Shut up Leroy!' said Coria.

'Sorry sir,' said Leroy.

'Leroy!' said Susanna.

'Sorry Susanna,' said Leroy. 'I'm sorry,' he said to both. Then Davy stepped forward.

'Look Mr. Coria,' said Davy, 'you have to admit that Susanna was given a pretty complicated job, and there might have been a lot of things lost in translation. And even if she was joking with those guys, she probably had no idea how literal they would take it. And those guys are going to catch on eventually.'

Coria just grabbed his head and walked away, yelling. Susanna walked over to the grill and sighed.

Davy walked over to her.

'Thanks for sticking up for me,' she said.

'It's no problem,' said Davy. 'I just want to say that, we got off to a rocky start and you probably don't like me, but we should try to get along if we're going to be working together.'

'Look let's start over.' She extended her hand, and Davy extended his.

Then Susanna grabbed his hand and pressed it to the grill.

'God damn it!' he yelled. Susanna just walked away and said two words.

'Peanut brittle?!'

Chapter 9

Now Susanna wasn't as much into makeup as other girls since she was a little bit of a tomboy. But the next morning she saw that she had accidentally bought eye shadow that was way darker than what she meant to get. But when she put it on, she kinda liked it. It made her look like a cross between Cleopatra and a linebacker, and she liked both of those. She went to her dad and asked him about it. At first he didn't seem to like it, but she looked in his eyes as if to say she was still his little girl.

'Maybe once in a while, and not at church,' he said, and she rarely did it more than once a week.

But on that day she did wear it, when she went to school, and as chance would have it that girl that Susanna made cry at work had the same class as her. When that girl came into class and saw Susanna sitting in the back, a visible chill went up that girl's spine. She sat several desks in front of Susanna so she wouldn't have to look at the crazy bitch, but she swore to God she could feel Susanna's eyes boring into the back of her head. She looked back and Susanna was looking at her, she looked back and again it was the same story, again and again.

Suddenly Susanna raised her hand to answer a question from the teacher, something she rarely did 'cause she figured she knew the answer and that's all that mattered. But anyway, when Susanna raised her hand, the other girl looked at her. And as Susanna said the answer, she didn't look at the teacher, she looked right at that other girl.

Susanna said, 'The Amplitude is two, the Period is Pi, and the Phase shift is negative Pi over four, duh.'

But when that girl looked back at Susanna, with her new dark makeup, contrasting against her pale eyes and those tiny black pupils, looking like the evil queen from Snow White. That other girl swore she heard, 'You're not getting paid to make your fat! Ass! Fatter!'

'That's right,' said the teacher. And that poor girl, for a reason only known to her and Susanna, got up and ran out of the room crying.

'Don't get mad,' said the teacher, 'you'll get it eventually.'

Now that girl wasn't fat, but you know how girls can be sometimes. But anyway, from that day forward whenever Susanna felt like being especially bitchy, she put that makeup on and it was like her war paint.

Now believe it or not, even though she was a good Christian girl, one of Susanna's favorite movies was Scarface. Her father had only let her watch it once, 'cause that was enough as far as he was concerned, but she loved it. Maybe it was because Tony Montana reminded her of her father since they both grew up poor. Or maybe it was because like her, Tony Montana knew what he wanted and got it. Or maybe it was the way he tried to take care of his sister, the way her brothers took care of her. Or maybe it was just if you put Tony Montana in the body of a teenage girl, he'd probably be every bit the

bitch Susanna was. But as far as she was concerned, the only thing really wrong with that movie was that Tony Montana didn't grab that shotgun from that son of a bitch sneaking up on him and shove it up his ass and pull the trigger.

And, unlike any of the other kids, Susanna seemed to get away with almost everything. She would constantly ride her skateboard down the hall, shouting at the top of her lungs. 'Make way for the bad guy! Bad guy coming through!'

And most of those kids and even the teachers would make way for her, like she really was Tony Montana. All the time they wondered, How does she get away with that? The fact was she was so intimidating even the teachers had to summon all their courage to face her, especially when she wore her war paint. Every time they scolded her, she argued with them, and she blew a bubble from her gum as if it was an exclamation point. The fact was Susanna felt empowered by herself and those teachers only felt empowered by their titles.

Even when she had detention she'd just sit in the back either yelling or muttering, 'I'm a political prisoner.'

Now if you think she was some kind of bad kid, you're wrong. Most of those were in the bathroom smoking or under the bleachers doing God knows what.

And if you think Susanna thought she was so special that the rules didn't apply to her, you're also wrong.

Susanna thought anyone could do what she did, if they just had the nerve to do it.

And whenever they'd hear, 'Make way for the bad guy! Bad guy coming through!' Leroy, Sheena and Davy ran to watch her ride by.

Leroy would watch 'cause he loved to see his sister happy, and most the time he loved to see her period.

Sheena rushed to watch her 'cause she thought that Susanna was a rebel and somehow able to be in the system but not a part of it.

Davy went to watch her 'cause even though in some ways he gave up on her, in other ways he hadn't. Men rarely give up on any woman until the day they're married or dead, and sometimes not even then.

But sometimes that skateboard made her look ten feet tall, and Davy realized he would have to work up to her rather than the other way around.

'Make way for the bad guy! Bad guy coming through!'

Clark and Sharon were always getting calls from the school and they would scold Susanna and punish her accordingly. But one day, they were called in to talk to the principal. As those two people walked into the school, they pondered what was going on.

'You don't think it had to do with those frogs we found in her room, do you?' asked Sharon.

'I'm not sure, I hope not,' replied Clark. 'Maybe we shouldn't mention it unless we have to.'

As they walked in to the principal's office the man seemed to be shocked for a second at Sharon's leopard spotted blouse and zebra striped jacket. But besides the parents not being what he expected, the principal was not anything like they expected. He had a pot belly, a giant head and pompadour, and he talked like a used car dealer.

He told joke after joke and shot small talk all over the place like he was trying to shoot gophers with it. The Morgans did what they could to be polite until Clark felt bound and determined to get to the point.

'Now um, this is about Susanna, right?' said Clark.

'Oh yeah, Susanna, great kid,' said Principal Jackass.

'Look, we know she can be a handful,' said Clark. 'Just tell us what the hell she did so we know what to yell at her when we make her stay in her room for a month.'

'Ha-ha-ha,' said Principal Jackass. 'You're quite a joker, Clark. It's just that she's been chewing gum in class.'

'That's it?' said Clark. Now I know that they put Al Capone in jail for tax evasion, but this is just silly.

'Well the thing is, there are rules in place and they have to be enforced, zero tolerance,' said the principal. 'I mean I've heard she does this almost every day.'

'But her grades are good?' said Clark.

'Well yeah, but it's disruptive,' said the principal.

'So she's making the other kids get bad grades?' asked Clark.

'I, uh... look, that's not the point,' said the principal.

'Well, if it's not the grades, then what results are you basing this on?' asked Clark.

'Look, I'm not talking about results. I'm talking about the rules.'

Now to Clark that was near-blasphemy. "It's not about results; it's about the rules." That's the same mentality that made us loose Vietnam.

'Look Clark, I thought you looked like Superman. Look, it's like a football team,' said the principal. 'You have to do what you're told. You played football, Clark?'

'For my high school? No, I was too busy working,' said Clark.

'Oh uh, well, you like Joe Montana, right?' said the principal.

'Actually,' said Sharon, 'we like the Raiders. ... Now that the Rams are gone, anyway. Traitors.'

'Oh, Oakland,' said the principal.

'Los Angeles,' said Sharon, rolling her eyes. At this point, Clark started to look for an excuse to leave.

'Look man,' Clark said, 'we really got to wrap this up, 'cause we got to uh... umm... we...'

Sharon spoke for him. 'We have to go home so we can drink beer and watch TV.' Now that's why he married that woman.

And with that they got up and left. Principal Jackass watched them walk down the hall as a teenage girl walked right by Sharon, and they were both wearing the same damn outfit.

'Gangs, bullies and kids flunking out left and right, and he has to waste our time with this,' said Clark.

When Clark and Sharon got home, Susanna came up to them to face the music.

'So what did Principal Jackass have to say?' asked Susanna.

'He was uh... um... ' said Clark.

'Go to your room!' said Sharon. 'I never want to talk to that guy ever again!'

'God damn it,' said Susanna, walking off to her room.

Chapter 10

Well, some days later Leroy insisted on Davy coming over to the Morgan house to play that Atari. At first Davy didn't even remember the window incident, but as he came in the house he started to hope to God no one else did.

'I don't understand why they put bear traps in the water,' said Leroy, joystick in hand, as they sat on that crazy living room couch.

'Uh, I think, it's like, alligators,' said Davy.

Soon Enos and Danny came out and they started to watch the boys play video games.

'They're crocodiles, Enos,' said Danny. 'Those are way scarier.'

'They're caiman,' said Enos. 'This is obviously supposed to take place in South America.'

Soon Calvin came out, 'You know, I have an interesting story about alligators,' he said.

Well not long after that Sharon came out and seemed to almost scold Danny and Enos.

'When are you two kids gonna get started?' she said.

'Mom, we really want to watch Leroy play Atari,' said Enos.

'Look, if you guys don't help me now, I don't think you'll ever help me,' said Sharon. 'You helped get them dirty; you have to help get them clean.'

So the two little boys groaned and walked to the closet door and opened it.

'Leroy, I played this game before,' said Davy. 'Don't go down that passageway, it takes forever and it's a dead end.' Just then he saw something that seemed like it was out of a Twilight Zone episode. Sharon Morgan walked by behind the couch with two rifles, a bolt action and a semiautomatic. She was followed by Enos with a revolver and a clip fed pistol. They were then followed by Danny with a pump action shot gun. Davy watched as the mother and two children laid all those weapons out on the kitchen table, along with a bottle of cleaner and a bottle of oil and three little brushes, and started to go to town on them.

Davy then turned to Leroy. 'Does your family really have five guns?'

'What? Five guns--are you crazy?' Leroy looked back at the kitchen table. 'Oh no man, you must have looked at that wrong or something. We only have one gun. We also have two rifles and two pistols.'

Davy couldn't stop himself from laughing. 'You have permits for them, right?'

'Permits? I don't know,' said Leroy. Davy laughed some more.

'We also got a pump action BB gun and an air rifle, for stuff like shooting rats out of palm trees,' said Leroy. 'But that's baby stuff.'

'Oh definitely,' said Davy. 'You don't even have to mention it.'

'What kind of weapons do you have?' said Leroy.

'Uh well, this might sound strange but I've really let myself fall behind in the whole weapon thing,' said Davy. 'I mean really far behind. I only got a Viking sword. I've been thinking of getting a rapier but you know, I've been kinda busy.'

'You know man,' said Calvin, 'I once shot one of those M134s--now that's a weapon.'

'Yeah man, I was thinking about getting one of those too,' said Davy.

'I'm not afraid to get shot; I've been shot before,' said Calvin.

'Yeah, you get shot once and survive, you're immune the rest of your life. It's like chicken pox,' said Davy.

Suddenly Susanna came out and she couldn't believe her stupid brothers let this asshole in their house. Susanna walked over and sat next to Leroy, on the other side from Davy.

'Shere Khan,' she whispered softly, and that big tiger-striped dog waddled up to her. 'Shere Khan, you're such a sweetheart, aren't you?' she said as she stoked his gigantic head with her tiny little hands. The dog let his tongue hang out and smiled.

'Oh, that big grin of yours reminds me of the day we met,' said Susanna. 'Oh, the horrors you must have experienced. In that trailer park we lived in, I would fall asleep to all those sad howls and barks pleading for help. It's so sad that in that park was a man that used to keep you and your brothers in those tiny little cages, starving you half to death to make you mean. Every so often he'd load up one of you in that pickup truck and drive off to God knows where. But when he returned and loaded you off that truck you just looked so awful I had to turn away. And sometimes he would drive off with one of your brothers and he'd just come back with an empty cage, and it made me so sad.'

'Rumor had it that one of those days, that horrible man had all his money riding on one big bet, so he had to make sure to win. He picked you, his best fighter by far, and to make sure he won, he decided he'd starve you like he starved no other dog before. But one day it must have gotten to the point where that madness ran deeper in you than it ever had. You broke out of that cage and ate the first thing you could get your jaws around.'

'The next day the landlord called the cops. They showed up and took all your brothers away, probably destroyed. But they found your master lying on the ground with all the flesh from his arms and legs stripped down to the bloody bone.'

'But they never found you. No one found you, until one night I came out and saw you. I was terrified at first, but then I saw how sad your eyes were and I knew you only wanted someone to protect you. So I opened my arms and you walked into them, and then you smiled that big goofy smile. Probably the first smile you ever had.'

Now this whole time Davy was playing that video game and he kept messing up right and left, terrified that he might be in the same room with a man eater. He normally would have felt skeptical of this story but after those

five guns--excuse me, one gun two rifles and two pistols, he wasn't sure what to think about this family. Of course that story was a lie; if you notice that dog's ears weren't even cropped. Although something similar might have been true for his father.

Calvin then held his leg up and rolled up his pants, showing a big scar.

'Remember when he did this?' Calvin said. 'I don't think he knew his own strength when he was younger. I thought I was gonna have to put him down but when I yelled at him, I swear to God he was embarrassed.'

'You're just not good with dogs, dude,' said Susanna. 'He'd do whatever I told him to, to whoever I told him to do it to.' She chuckled.

Just then Clark got home from work. As he hung his keys on a hook on the wall he looked around the house and noticed there was an extra kid there. Clark walked over to Calvin and shoved him off the couch and sat next to Davy. And he stared at that boy until Davy slowly turned his head.

'You sure got nerve kid, I'll give you that,' said Clark.

'Look sir, I'm really sorry about what happened and I just want to say I'm glad you caught me and your daughter did approximately what she did. I'm not happy about my hands, but it's my fault. I should just be glad it wasn't worse. Besides, they healed all right.'

'What's going on?' asked Calvin.

'This is that window kid,' said Susanna.

'Oh,' said Calvin walking up behind Davy, 'you know, Dad, when I'm kicking his ass you can kick him in the face if you want.'

Clark smiled, 'See you met my guard dogs. That one's called Shere Khan and Calvin is my other one. Now depending on what you say next, I'm going to decide on whether or not to let him off his leash. What are you doing here?'

'I'm friends with Leroy,' said Davy.

'Are you now?' said Clark. 'Hey Leroy, is this guy your friend?'

'Yeah Dad,' said Leroy, playing his video game and seeming almost oblivious to the drama around him until now. 'He helps me at school with some of my homework, and we work at Queen Cali's together and he helped me get a raise there, too, and he tried to get this one girl to go out with me, but I really like this other girl Sheena.'

'Oh Sheena, Clark,' said Sharon, wiping a rifle with a towel, 'I don't think you met her, she's a pretty little thing.'

'Yeah, I don't think Sheena and Davy liked each other at first,' said Leroy, 'but now I think they're starting to.'

'Davy, huh?' said Clark. 'Do you like my daughter?'

'He says he doesn't anymore,' said Susanna, 'but I'm not sure about him.'

'Well, Davy?' said Clark.

'OK,' said Davy, 'first I just want to say that this is a really touchy subject, and I'm going to--and I think we all should--think very carefully about what we say and about how we react to what is said.'

'Well said, Davy,' said Clark.

'OK,' said Davy, 'I thought I liked her at first but, but she just has some attributes... that I'm not sure.. that we would be a good mix at all... that well. Not that they're bad attributes, I just don't think that we could get along with each other.'

'What kind of attributes?' said Clark.

'Well, remember what I said before,' said Davy, 'but your daughter can be, well, she's... she's not very nice.' Remember, Davy was very brave.

"Not very nice," said Clark. 'Leroy is your sister "not very nice?"'

'One time, Dad,' said Leroy, 'I read the book of Revelations very carefully, because I was trying see if the Anti-Christ could be a woman.' By then the whole family was listening and what Leroy said made everyone there start laughing, even the dog. Even Davy, until Calvin slapped him in the back of the head.

'Quiet, window boy,' said Calvin.

'Did you ever ask Pastor Madison that question?' Clark asked Leroy.

'He said he thought the Anti-Christ was a man but he wasn't sure,' said Leroy.

'Let's get the answer straight from the Anti-Christ's mouth,' said Clark.

'It depends,' said Susanna. 'The term Anti-Christ is mostly used in first and second John, but a lot of people think it's synonymous with the Beast in Revelations. I think that's what Leroy was talking about. I'm not sure but it says the Beast is a king, and that would imply he's a man. Revelations is hard to understand 'cause in a lot a ways it's written in code so that the Romans wouldn't destroy the text if they found it--they'd just think it was a bunch of gibberish. Books like Ezekiel are written in a similar way 'cause the Jews were being oppressed by the Babylonians at the time, at least that's what I think.

'Sometimes I wonder if Revelations had already taken place during the Roman empire. If you lived through the fall of the Roman Empire, you probably would have thought it was the end of the world. Sometimes I think it's going to take place in the future, and sometimes I think it's always on the verge of happening if we're not careful and not prepared. But whatever the case, I think it's a lot like Plato's Atlantis in some ways: it's about an empire that becomes corrupt and oppressive and goes against the will of God. And that we as Christians or almost any group of people should be prepared to fight and/or survive oppression. "Whoever leads into captivity goes into captivity himself."

Davy raised an eyebrow at that little chatterbox.

'So in other words, you don't know,' said Clark.

'No, not really,' said Susanna.

'Davy, do you have parents?' asked Clark.

'Well, I have my mom,' said Davy.

'Oh, I remember her,' said Clark. 'OK man, you're going to have to leave now. But you can come back if you bring your mother. A good time would be this Saturday at noon. How about that?'

'Well that sounds good, I guess,' said Davy.

'Good,' said Clark, 'Calvin, show him out.'

And Calvin lifted that boy over the couch and pushed him out the door. Calvin never said it at the time, but he felt that that boy was actually pretty strong and if he turned around and fought him, it might have been a good fight. Still, Calvin thought he would have won.

Now the Morgans were more than sure that they'd never see Davy again. But that Saturday Clark and Sharon put a grill in the backyard, a bag of chips and salsa on the picnic table and some beers in the cooler. As the cartoons ran down, all the kids started to go out in the back yard and help their father prepare meat and sauce for the grill. Whether or not Davy and his mother showed up, they were going to have a barbeque.

But soon they heard a door open and close next door and footsteps come around to their back yard, and Davy and his mother made their debut.

'Now remember, Mom, don't talk about my drinking and stuff,' whispered Davy.

'God, I got it, OK?' his mother said.

As Davy came around the corner of the house he heard Clark's voice.

'One of the reasons I wanted this house was this walnut tree. I knew it'd cut down on grocery bills.'

Suddenly Davy heard what he could only described as a bloodcurdling squeak. And then if he thought the other day wasn't weird enough, he looked over and saw something bizarre. He saw the littlest Morgan child raise that air rifle in the air and shoot a squirrel out of the walnut tree. He then took the squirrel over to a table, where Susanna skinned and gutted it with a razor blade and chopped it up with a hatchet. She then put it in a bowl of water with its companions. Davy looked over at the grill and saw Clark painting little animal parts with sauce, and he knew it wasn't chicken.

'There sure are a lot of them,' said Sharon.

'These must be stupid preppy squirrels that wandered over from Beverly Hills,' said Calvin.

'They're just not used to people eating them,' said Susanna, as she stepped on a squirrel's tail, pulling on its feet, ripping it out of its skin. 'It's kinda like when they put that new road in and we kept running over birds. 'Cause the birds around there weren't used to cars. ... Oh.'

Susanna turned around and saw Davy. Leroy went to meet Davy, as Clark and Sharon went to meet his mother. They talked for a while, until Sharon couldn't help herself.

'So Amy, are you like, Chinese or Japanese?' asked Sharon.

'If I had a dime for every time I was asked that,' said Davy's mother. 'I'm from Thailand.' Sharon seemed confused.

'That's another name for Siam, Sharon,' said Clark.

'Oh like in The King and I,' said Sharon.

'Believe it or not, I never even saw that movie till I came to this country,' said Davy's Mother.

Davy and his mother sat together at the picnic table, and the whole time Davy was half-expecting the Morgans to say the squirrel meat was a joke. But they set the platter right in the middle of the table with a head looking right at Davy with a big buck toothed smile.

And all those Morgans grabbed a piece and started gnawing on it. Davy had no expectation of what his mother would do, but he never expected her to grab a piece and without any hesitation start gnawing on it, too.

'Mom,' said Davy, 'you know that, that's squirrel, right?'

'David,' she replied, 'most American food seems strange to me.' All the Morgans started to laugh, and Davy's mom started to laugh with them.

Davy felt like he was in that Twilight Zone episode again, only his mother was in on it, too. Not knowing what to do he decided what the hell-- he went native. He picked one of those squirrels up and ate it.

'You're name's Clark?' said Davy's mother. 'I've never met anyone named Clark.'

'It's a family name,' said Clark.

'You know, you do kind of look like Superman,' said Davy's mother.

'If I had a dime for every time I was told that,' said Clark.

Now the first time any of the Morgans had ever heard of Thailand or Siam or whatever it was, was The King and I. And the first thing Davy's mother had ever heard about America was Superman. But oddly enough, that was enough for them to start to relate to each other and start to like each other.

When most of the meat was gone and everyone was just eating chips or drinking beer, depending on their age, Susanna picked up her guitar and started playing and singing.

'Some people try to pick up girls

And get called assholes.

This never happened to Pablo Picasso...

...Pablo Picasso was never called an asshole. Not like you...'

And every time she sang, 'not like you,' she looked up at that boy, and Davy did his best to ignore it.

'Davy,' said Clark, 'your mother said you were pretty good with drawing and painting?'

'Well kinda,' said Davy, 'I'm good enough to turn some heads but I don't think I can ever make a living at it. I kinda don't do it as much anymore.'

'Well, you're probably right,' said Clark. 'Most kids today get told they can do anything if they put their minds to it. They'll never tell you it's usually a lie, a lie that's screwed more people over than we know. You should just try and be a man; history will decide the rest.'

'When I was younger I thought I was going to be the sixth Beach Boy. For some reason it didn't work out. Charles Manson got closer than I did.'

'But I still like to play the guitar now and then. Maybe you'll be an artist and maybe you won't, but don't let your talent go to waste completely. I think most of us could do a little better understanding art. God only knows how much progress has been spawned by a guy looking at a painting, or how much madness. At least you know what the hell you're looking at.'

'No, I get that,' said Davy.

'So you like Picasso?' said Clark.

'Not really I'm more into guys like Frank Frezetta, and Brian Froud,' said Davy. 'I kinda think that guys like Picasso just made status symbols. Like it's a way for rich people to say, "Hey look, I'm so rich I can afford to spend my money on stupid stuff." And now it's like, the Emperor's new clothes: if you don't like him you're called an idiot.'

Susanna kept playing her guitar but she raised her head and spoke clearly. 'You're wrong, you know, Picasso was a genius. What you said is true about a lot of other artists but that's not true about Picasso.'

'You're just trying to start an argument with me,' said Davy.

'I don't need to start an argument with you 'cause you're always wrong, dude,' said Susanna.

'OK then, what was Picasso about? Why did he paint all crazy like that?' said Davy.

'He was trying to paint the fourth dimension,' said Susanna.

'You and the fourth dimension,' said Clark. 'One of these days I'm going to knock you into the fourth dimension, if you don't watch yourself.'

'Personally, I think Picasso smelled a little too many fumes from that paint remover,' said Calvin.

Susanna only walked over to her father and kissed him. She hugged her mother and went inside.

Clark turned to Davy's mother.

'Some people might think she's "Not very nice" but she's our baby girl.' He put his arm around Sharon as she nodded.

'My father said I was terror, too,' said Davy's mother, laughing.

Well after a while, with Susanna not around to strum the guitar, Leroy picked it up. As the boy played Davy looked at him with envy. Davy went home and got his guitar, walked up to Leroy and sat down beside his friend.

'You really got to show me how to do that,' said Davy. 'You're always making excuses not to do it.'

'It's easy man, try this.' Leroy played the guitar.

'Look, what are you doing man?' said Davy. 'Just show me something basic.'

'Well I just, uh, you just, um, try this,' said Leroy playing something far from basic. 'See, it's easy.'

'Come here, Davy,' said Clark. Davy sat next to Clark. 'I'll show you, but it's a lot of hard work.'

'Can you show me some chords or something?' said Davy.

'Let's start with the something else first,' said Clark. 'See look, the top of this string should sound like the bottom of this string--get it?'

'Yeah,' said Davy.

'Now listen to that, you're a little off,' said Clark, tightening one of Davy's strings.

Chapter 11

Now in Davy's room there were four music posters, Black Sabbath, Def Leopard, Iron Maiden, and Judas Priest, probably like a lot of kids his age. Now those were just the music posters; what was probably not as common was he also covered his walls with L'il Abner and Conan the Barbarian, 'cause Frank Frezetta was his hero. As he practiced what Clark had taught him on the guitar, he looked at L'il Abner and couldn't help but think about how much the Morgans reminded him of the cartoon, and yet they didn't fit the hillbilly stereotype exactly, just like he and his mother weren't the stereotypical Asians, if there ever was such a thing. They didn't have accents, and they seemed deeper somehow.

He kept thinking about what Susanna had said about Picasso, and soon he couldn't stop thinking about it.

When Susanna coasted down the halls of the school on that skateboard of hers, no one talked to her; it was almost like she was the Queen of China. If you talked to her it meant your life, and that was just as well with her. So when Davy wanted to talk to her, he had to catch her at a door as she stepped off the thing.

'Susanna!' he yelled, and she was perplexed at how he seemed giddy as a school boy. Even though he was a school boy, he was rarely giddy.

'It was time,' he said. 'Picasso was painting time, kind of. Is that right?'

'Yeah,' said Susanna, 'that's right.' Susanna was shocked. If you take one thing home with you, that's how Susanna felt. Most the time people wouldn't get what she was talking about if she pounded it into them, and the idea that someone would understand it from a passive comment she made was something new, and she couldn't help but think it was special. And she couldn't help but walk and talk with the boy.

'I got the idea,' said Davy, 'when I was watching this old Chuck Jones cartoon. I noticed that in some of the frames Bugs Bunny had three or four ears and looked like a big gray blob. He looked like that 'cause he was moving.

'Some of Picasso's paintings you see the front of a man's face and the side of a man's face at the same time, like a lost frame in a cartoon. Is that right?'

'Yes, yes,' said Susanna, still looking skeptical.

'They talked about that in The Time Machine, too,' said Davy, 'but I think maybe it might be more than that. Maybe if you could see the fourth dimension you could see around corners and through things.'

'You really thought of this in a couple of days?' said Susanna.

'Well kinda,' said Davy. 'I'm still not sure I get it completely. I mean, what would the fourth dimension even look like? Susanna, where do you go during lunch?'

'Why do you want to know?' she said.

'I just want to talk about this stuff,' said Davy.

'I ... I...' said Susanna, 'I'll just eat lunch with you.'

'What do you think the fourth dimension would even look like?'

asked Davy.

'I don't, and I don't think anyone thinks that it's possible for humans to see it or understand it beyond a certain point. You can really only understand it with math. Other than that, I think you have to understand that you can't understand it. There's a good book I read called Flat Land. The basic plot can help you understand what the fourth dimension is.'

'Well, what's the book about?' asked Davy.

Susanna walked and talked with Davy and for the first time, Susanna waited in the lunch line with the rest of the kids. She usually didn't eat lunch.

'I've had so many classes where they called Picasso a genius but they never even said why,' Davy continued. 'I mean, is every teacher trying to be wrong?'

'I don't know,' said Susanna. 'I used to think it was some kind of conspiracy, then I thought that maybe they thought that if we thought of it for ourselves that we might somehow understand it better. But nobody seems to get it. I really think you can chalk it up to good old fashioned incompetence.'

'Sometimes it makes people mad, too. I don't know why, but it does.'

'But why? You know what I was thinking?' said Davy. 'If someone could really understand the fourth dimension they could have super powers. You could have Jedi powers.'

'Maybe even more than that,' said Susanna. Just then they sat down next to Leroy and Sheena. 'You know, sometimes I think Picasso was the last great fine artist. I mean, he was like one of the last artists that was actually popular among normal people. When the Germans took over Paris they lined up around the block to meet Picasso; when the Americans liberated Paris they did the same thing. And they were just soldiers, normal people.'

'You saw the same thing happen to fine artists all through history. When Donatello died most of Florence went to his funeral. An entire city went to his funeral. Most fine artists nowadays are only known by a handful of people in some rich, old money, in-crowd and the artists never attempt to relate to everyday people.'

'What about Dali and Andy Warhol?' said Davy.

'Yeah, but they're not as good as they used to be,' said Susanna, 'and I don't think they're as big as Picasso, and when they're gone, fine art will probably go with them.'

'So is fine art just going to die?' asked Davy.

'Maybe,' said Susanna, 'but believe it or not, I think that it's people like Steven Spielberg that are going to pick up the mantle of the real fine artists. Maybe all that's happening is the technology is changing. It's just a lot of people don't get that.'

'What is Andy Warhol about?' asked Davy.

Susanna laughed. 'I'm not sure. I haven't followed him as much. He's Post Modern, not a Modernist like Picasso or Dali, so a lot of his messages are probably a lot different. I think that a lot of what he's tried to do is use contemporary mythology to tell stories. Like Donatello used King David, Warhol used contemporary myth like Elvis and Marilyn Monroe. He even used technology like photographs and even other people's pictures. In the near future there might even be movies and music made that are just clips from preexisting art.'

'That's it?' said Davy.

'I told you he wasn't as big as Picasso,' said Susanna, 'but he's done better than we have. Communication is very important in art. You may even argue communication is what art is.'

'What about scientists, though?' said Davy. 'I mean, they have to have found the fourth dimension.'

'Oh yeah, more or less,' said Susanna. 'Most of the time when scientists say the universe is expanding, they mean fourth-dimensionally. Remember Flat Land? Imagine the Flat Land universe curved into a sphere, and then expanding like a balloon. Our universe might be like that--a Hypersphere. At least that's one idea now.'

'If it's a Hypersphere it would have to be in hyperspace, right?' said Dave. 'Like in Star wars.'

'That right? Star Wars and Picasso have something in common. "You've taken your first step into a larger world,"' said Susanna.

'Star Wars and Picasso?' said Sheena. 'I always knew you were a closet nerd, Davy.'

'I like Star Wars,' said Leroy.

'Just because I'm smart doesn't mean I'm a nerd,' said Davy. 'Maybe you should try it sometime.'

Sheena put her spork down and looked ready for a fist-fight.

'Look guys,' said Leroy, 'you said you weren't going to fight anymore.'

'You're right Leroy,' said Davy. 'Sheena, I'm sorry.'

'Susanna,' said Sheena, 'you're not with this guy, are you?'

'No,' said Davy, 'but why would that be so weird? I did buy her that lunch, so some people might argue this is a date.' Now as much as Susanna had started to enjoy Davy's presence, what Davy just said... well, it... it pissed her the hell off.

Suddenly when Susanna was done chewing her mouthful, she leaned over and spit it into a pile on top of Davy's food. Leroy and Sheena started laughing their asses off.

Davy was so pissed off that he almost couldn't stand it. He narrowed his eyes and looked up and to the left. Then he looked at the pretty girl that made him so mad and her pretty mouth and then looked at the chewed food on his plate. This could be the closest he would ever get to that pretty mouth. And he sporked up that chewed food and ate it.

'Not that bad, Susanna,' said Davy as he swallowed. And those other kids went mute, but Susanna looked angered. She chewed up some food and spit it up again, then again, then again.

'What's the matter Davy?' said Susanna. 'Lost your appetite? I thought you loved me.'

Davy pushed his tray to the center of the table and started to walk off in a huff. But suddenly, when he was still in earshot, he turned around.

'Susanna, I'm sorry, OK?' he yelled back. 'I'll see you later, tomorrow, OK?' He walked away.

Susanna got up and skateboarded away.

'Leroy,' said Sheena as she grabbed his hand.

The next day Davy met Susanna before lunch again.

'Susanna!' he yelled, 'I wanted to talk to you.'

'About what?' she said.

'What are you doing at lunch?' asked Davy.

At lunch they sat at a bench at the front of the school. The only lunch they had was a can of Coke each.

'You know what I always thought about' said Davy, 'was The Day of the Dead and Halloween.'

'What about them?' said Susanna.

'Well, just think about it,' said Davy. 'America got Halloween from the Irish, but Mexico got The Day of the Dead from the Aztecs. How could two different people from opposite sides of the world invent the same holiday with the same basic theme on almost on the same date? If you think about it, the only way that that's possible is that it must be the most ancient holiday ever, like even before the American Indians came to America. In the middle of the Ice Age.'

'Yes, that's probably true,' said Susanna, 'yes.'

'I read once that the Celts believed that Fairies would go from house to house,' said Davy, 'and if people didn't have their torches lit that they would get dragged off to the underworld. But in some ways it reminds me of Christmas in how Santa Claus goes to people's houses, and people used to believe Santa Claus would bring a monster with him called Krampus, and if kids didn't prepare or if they were bad, he would take them away. I kind of think that maybe they used to be the same holiday.'

'You know,' Susanna said, 'I was reading the book of Exodus once and I started to think that Passover sounded a lot like Halloween. When the Jews heard that the angel of death was coming, they lit torches and put blood on their doors, just like the Celts did with the fairies. And they couldn't go outside after dark on either holiday.'

'That's why I like to celebrate holidays,' said Susanna, 'not just because of what we know, but what we don't know.'

‘There’s like this one holiday celebrated by this one tribe in Malaysia, I think, that reminds me a lot of Halloween, too,’ said Davy.

Soon they got up and started walking around the school. And well, those two went on talking about the craziest shit, and Davy found that he felt comfortable talking about all his weird daydreams that he would have felt embarrassed to tell any other girl. And unlike most girls, he felt like he actually learned something at the end. And he asked her about the fourth dimension again, and she mostly just repeated what she said before but he found it so interesting that he listened anyway. They were both late for class.

Now for several weeks Susanna and Davy talked and talked again, until one day Davy asked her something that he had almost forgot about.

‘Susanna, why don’t we go out sometime?’ said Davy.

‘Why do you want to go out with me?’ said Susanna.

‘Look at how we talk together,’ said Davy. ‘I don’t think I ever talked to a girl the way I talk to you.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything, Davy,’ said Susanna.

‘Well God damn it, I think it does mean something,’ said Davy. ‘Come on, what’s stopping you? Can’t we just go to a movie or something?’

‘You’re just not my kind of guy, Davy,’ said Susanna.

‘What the hell is your kind of guy?’ said Davy. Susanna got up and started walking away.

‘Susanna!’ said Davy. ‘I mean it, what’s your type of guy? Just say what you want and I’ll do what I can to be what you want.’ Susanna turned around and sat back down and sighed.

‘My Kind of Guy,’ said Susanna, like it was a title. ‘Well, he’d have to be handsome.’ Davy threw his hair back and smiled, ‘and he’d have to be strong.’ Davy sat down beside her and flexed his big arm, ‘and very smart.’ Davy did his impression of Rodin’s Thinker, and Susanna giggled a little, ‘and very funny.’ Davy put his hands upside down over his face and stuck his tongue out, ‘but humble.’ Davy folded his hands and looked into the sky, looking very meek. ‘And he’d have to understand I want to wait till I’m married.’

‘Yeah...’ said Davy, ‘Wait for what?’

Well what the hell do you think, you moron?

Susanna got up and started to walk away.

‘Wait Susanna,’ said Davy, running to meet her. ‘Look, I was just taken aback. Come on. It’s just that, that could be, like, five or ten years away.’

‘Maybe, or maybe it could be fifteen or even twenty,’ said Susanna. ‘Like I said, Davy, you’re not my kind of guy.’

‘I’d do it!’ yelled Davy.

‘You’re lying,’ said Susanna. ‘You’d say anything to get what you want.’

'Look, just relax,' said Davy. 'I'm not saying that I think you're the absolute one for me and we'll get married for sure someday--let's have a reality check here. But if we were together, I'd do what you wanted, as long as we were together. Susanna, what do you say? Susanna? Just think about it, OK?'

And Susanna got on her skateboard and rode off. The next day they didn't talk. And the day after that they did.

Chapter 12

One day Susanna came home and sat next to her mother and watched TV until her father came home. Her father sat next to her. Susanna was sitting between her parents.

‘Guys, Mom, Dad,’ said Susanna, ‘I have to tell you something.’

‘What is it, honey?’ said Sharon.

‘I... I made a date for this Friday night,’ said Susanna.

‘What?’ said Clark.

‘I agree with your father,’ said Sharon.

‘I told him to come early so he could have dinner or something with you guys before we go to a movie or something,’ said Susanna, ‘so what do you think?’

Susanna looked at her mother and then they both looked at her father.

‘God damn it,’ said Clark, ‘you know what? It’s gonna happen one these days, isn’t it? God damn it.’

Susanna and Sharon got on either side of their favorite man and kissed him.

That Friday night Sharon was so worked up you’d think she was going on a date. She spent her time in Susanna’s room watching Susanna try on different clothes and she finally decided on a sundress with a denim jacket. Sharon insisted on putting Susanna’s makeup on and then started brushing her hair for what seemed the longest time.

‘Well, I’m just glad you don’t want to wear that dark eye shadow like you wear sometimes,’ said Sharon. ‘Don’t get me wrong, it’s cute, but I don’t know about it for a date. My God, you are so beautiful when you’re made up. You’re always beautiful but it’s nice to make you up for something that isn’t church. And that isn’t really the same thing ‘cause you don’t wear makeup then.’

‘I love your hair,’ continued Sharon. ‘You know, I think you have my mother’s hair. She had red hair, but none of us kids had it. She said it was probably a good thing ‘cause she got made fun for it all the time, but I always thought it was beautiful. Were you ever made fun of?’

‘For my hair?’ said Susanna. ‘No I don’t think so, I usually got in trouble for other stuff first. Mom, I think you have beautiful hair, it’s so black it’s almost blue.’

‘You’re such a tomboy sometimes. I think it might be the strong male blood on your father’s side,’ said Sharon. ‘You know, when I married your father he said that judging from his family that we’d probably just have a bunch of boys. That made me sad ‘cause when I was a girl I always dreamed of having a whole gaggle of daughters, all pretty and dainty. When you were born and I knew that you were a girl I was so relieved. But you know I think

you're better than most people's daughters. I'm glad I got one of you versus a bunch of them.'

'Mom,' said Susanna.

'Stand up and twirl around,' said Sharon.

'Again? Mom, you're obsessed,' said Susanna.

'Just do it,' said Sharon.

Susanna twirled around and kissed her mother.

As the two women walked out into the family room the whole family was there. Clark hugged and kissed Susanna and then his wife.

'Hey Leroy,' said Calvin, 'we should go outside and look tough for when this guy comes. Maybe we'll scare him away.'

'I don't know if I can look that tough,' said Leroy.

'Just act like I act,' said Calvin as he and Leroy started to step outside.

'Now wait a minute, boys,' said Sharon, 'just hold it for a second. You should roll up your sleeves a little so he can see your muscles better.'

'Oh, thanks Mom,' said Calvin.

Well the family watched TV with Calvin and Leroy waiting outside, until finally they heard a voice outside.

'Hey guys, what did you do with your sleeves?'

And then Mike Taylor walked through the front door with Leroy and Calvin close behind, still trying to look tough.

Susanna and Mike sat at the table with Leroy and Calvin on either side, and the rest of the family sat around them.

'So you met Susanna at school?' said Sharon.

'Oh yeah,' said Mike, 'we have study hall together. She helped me with history class. I still got a C, though.'

'Knowing Susanna, she probably gave you the wrong answers, on purpose,' said Enos. 'She told me once that Caligula appointed a monkey man as the head priest of Rome and then the monkey man got in a fight with Conan the Barbarian.'

Mike giggled a little but no one else did.

'So, you go to church, Mike?' asked Clark.

'Oh yeah,' said Mike.

'What religion are you?' asked Clark.

'Christian,' said Mike.

'Yeah, but what kind? What denomination?' said Clark.

'I uh, I'm...,' Mike was confused.

'Well let's narrow it down,' said Clark. 'Are there Nuns there or not?'

'Nuns? Uh, um,' said Mike, 'I'm not sure.'

'You don't know if there's Nuns or not?' asked Clark. 'Is your preacher married?'

'Uh, um,' said Mike.

'How old were you when you were baptized?' said Clark.

'Uh, um.'

'There aren't snakes there, are there?' asked Sharon.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Mike. And then that conversation was followed by long silence, until Mike felt he had to make up for that disaster.

'So, uh, did you guys just move to Los Fronteriza?' asked Mike.

'Oh yeah,' said Calvin.

'Where'd you move from?' asked Mike.

'Oilville,' said Sharon.

'Oilville?' said Mike. 'Isn't that where they had all those Klan rallies?'

'Ain't really sure,' said Susanna in a mock redneck accent. 'Can't say I'd ever seen one, tell you what.'

'Hmmm,' said Mike.

Well that went on as well as you could expect until Susanna and Mike got up to leave. Now Mike was as relieved as a pardoned murderer when he thought he was finally going to get that pretty girl away from her family that he thought seemed like a cross between the Clampetts and the Adams. But he was wrong. To everyone's surprise, especially Leroy's, Clark told Leroy to go on the date with them.

Mike and Susanna got in the front seat of Mike's car, and Leroy got in the back.

'So, uh, you all right back there? Lee Roy,' said Mike.

'I don't know, man,' said Leroy. 'These seat belts are all weird, man, and like, I don't get how they...'

'Glad to hear it!' said Mike, as they drove off.

From the minute Susanna was gone, Clark sat on the outside couch and wouldn't move. Sharon sat next to him most of the time and even went and got him a beer, which he nursed for an hour. Clark insisted they keep the front window opened a little so they could hear the phone ring.

'Oh Clark, don't be afraid,' said Sharon. 'Leroy is with her. And you know Susanna's a real good girl; we did a good job with her. I wouldn't trust her with a lighter and a can of gasoline but I trust her with a lot of other things.'

'I know I'm overreacting, but I just can't help it,' said Clark.

Now when Clark was in Vietnam he killed two men and someone else, too. And he had been in several situations where he swore to God he was going to die, but right now he was more terrified than he had ever been in his life.

Now you might think that Clark is overreacting, like he said, or maybe you don't. But the bond between a father and daughter is a very strange and strong one, and for Clark and Susanna, it might have been even stranger and stronger.

To understand Clark's relationship with his daughter, you have to understand the relationship he had with his sister. Now Clark's sister was the first girl born a Morgan since the Victorian age and maybe a lot further back than that. In fact, Clark's father and all his relatives never even

remembered a Morgan girl, and the Morgans loved their family and remembered their family tree a lot more than other people.

When Clark's sister was born his father doted on her and talked about her with almost all of his waking breath. He talked about how he would save up money to buy her fancy dresses and makeup and perfume and all that girl stuff. He was convinced when she was grown that she would be the prettiest girl in Oilville.

When she was about two and Clark was about eight, Clark found her dead. She caught a case of pneumonia that hit her so fast that the family didn't even notice she was sick. It was like someone just came in, in the middle of the night, and turned the little girl off.

When Susanna was born Clark thought it was a miracle. He saw it as a second chance that he wasn't going to screw up if he had to fight Lord Death himself. Clark named Susanna after his sister.

Sharon put her arm around Clark and stroked his face with her other hand.

'Don't worry, Clark,' said Sharon, 'we can stay out here as long as you want, it's OK. I'm recording Cheers.'

Clark smiled.

Unbeknownst to the Morgans, Davy was staring out his front window the whole time Susanna was gone. He stood eating an apple and had the book Flat Land close by.

'David, Shelly is on the phone,' said his mother. 'Do you want to talk to her?'

'Just tell her I'm not home,' said Davy.

Davy's mother walked over and put her hands on Davy's shoulders.

'You're looking for that girl, aren't you?' said Davy's mother.

'No,' said Davy.

'My God, I don't think I've seen you this worked up over a girl in a long time,' she said.

'Why did... how... how could she go out with Mike Taylor?' said Davy. 'He's a dork and a sleaze, and he's a moron.'

'I just hope you take it easy,' said his mother as she kissed him.

Eventually Mike's car pulled up and Susanna and Leroy got out. Mike didn't, for some reason, and Clark wondered if he was just being rude or if something was wrong.

'Well, sorry about what happened, Mike,' said Susanna. 'Just keep pressure on it. You're OK to drive, right? OK.'

Mike drove off and Clark went up to Susanna and hugged her.

'Oh little girl,' said Clark.

'My God, Dad,' said Susanna, 'you were out here all night?'

'No I wasn't,' said Clark. 'We just like to sit out here sometimes.'

'Dad,' said Susanna.
'So how'd it go?' asked Clark.
'I don't think it's going to work out,' said Susanna.

Now when Susanna and Mike and oh yeah, Lee Roy, got to the movies they were starting to have a minor argument.

'You mean he's going to actually go into the movie with us?' said Mike.

'He has to, that's what my parents expected,' said Susanna.

'Leroy, do you have any money?' said Mike.

'No, I left so fast I didn't think to bring it,' said Leroy.

'God damn it,' said Mike, 'I don't want to pay for him.'

'Well I'm sure as hell not going to pay for him,' said Susanna. 'And I'm not going in without him. We could try to sneak in if you want.'

'I don't know,' said Mike.

'Stop being such a panty wuss,' said Susanna.

'Fine, I'll pay for your brother,' said Mike

'Man, I'll pay you back, man,' said Leroy.

'Shut up Leroy!' said Susanna.

'Look Leroy,' said Mike, 'you go get our drinks while we wait in line for the tickets, OK?' Mike handed Leroy some money. 'I want a Sprite-Dr. Pepper mix, OK? You want something, Susanna? OK, whatever, go Leroy. Thank you.'

Leroy walked away to the food stand.

'Man,' said Mike, 'your dad is pretty strict, huh?'

'I think he's pretty normal,' said Susanna. 'I mean, it's not like he's a nun.'

'Yeah, that's funny,' said Mike, forcing a smile. He grabbed Susanna's hand. Susanna took her hand away and sneezed in it and then grabbed his hand again. Mike took his hand away and wiped it on his pants.

Soon Mike seemed to be staring away into space, but Susanna couldn't help but look at the guy in line in front of them, mostly 'cause he had a Mohawk and a braid going down his back, he wore purple glasses and looked like he just drank three pots of coffee.

Susanna couldn't help herself; she smacked him on the back of his head. The man turned around and looked at Susanna but Susanna just looked at Mike. Then Mohawk man turned back around. Susanna smacked him again and he turned around, looking as mad as a badger.

'Mike, what are you doing?' said Susanna.

'What do you mean?' said Mike. Mohawk man looked at Mike and felt pretty sure what the hell was going on.

'You think you're funny, schmuck?' he said.

'What the hell are you talking about?' said Mike.

'Mike, just apologize,' said Susanna.

'Don't worry, he's going to be sorry soon enough,' said Mohawk man. Mohawk man grabbed Mike and Mike started slapping his hands off until they started punching each other. After Mohawk man landed a couple of good ones, Mike took off running. Mohawk man tripped him and then started kicking him and stepping on his neck.

'Ouch! What the hell is your problem! AAhh! PLEASE STOP!'

'Yowserz,' said Susanna, she smiled and chuckled. Leroy came out with Mike's drink.

'Where's Mike?' asked Leroy. 'They didn't have Sprite, so I got Dr. Pepper and 7-up. I hope that's OK. Oh my God, there're guys fighting over there.'

'Yeah, teach him a lesson. You know, I think that punk guy has golf shoes on,' said Susanna as she took the drink and started sipping it. 'I guess that tastes OK.'

Susanna hugged her parents.

'I don't think it's going to work out,' said Susanna.

Chapter 13

Now Davy, Susanna, and Leroy were all into skateboards and one day they heard about kids looking into other people's back yards to see if they had empty swimming pools, 'cause a curved empty swimming pool is one of the best things to skate board in, they said. Of course it was illegal but that just made them want to do it more, especially Susanna, who loved breaking petty laws.

That day they set out skating and soon came up on a busy intersection. The kids stopped at a crosswalk, except for Davy, who threw down his skateboard and skated across it. Leroy gasped and Susanna rolled her eyes as Davy cruised through the intersection, dodging cars and standing on his board like he was waiting in line at the grocery store. As an added bonus he slapped one of the cars as it drove by, nearly missing him.

When Susanna and Leroy finally got across, catching up with Davy, Davy caught Susanna looking at him out of the corner of her eye. Finally she noticed Davy noticed her.

"That was pretty Kool," she admitted.

They wandered the richer part of town where the one story ranch houses gave way to two or three story Neo-eclectic houses climbing up on a side of a hill, giving them a good view of the whole town.

When they finally found a house with an empty pool they argued over whether the people were there or not. Susanna let Leroy hold her skateboard. 'Look, I'm just gonna knock on the door, if you wusses need to know so bad.' She walked around the house and out of sight.

'Susanna wait,' said Davy. But Susanna came back soon enough.

'What would you have done if they answered the door?' asked Davy.

'Whatever, dork, I'd just tell them I was looking for my goldfish that ran away,' said Susanna. 'Leroy, you jump the fence first to see if it's clear.'

'Why me?' asked Leroy.

'You're taller than us, Leroy,' said Susanna. 'You can jump back easier, if you have to.'

'But I think me and Davy are the same height,' said Leroy. 'I just think that I look taller 'cause I'm skinnier.'

'Just do it!' said Susanna.

So that poor boy climbed that bar fence and stopped at the top, resting on one foot.

'I just hope there aren't any dogs,' said Leroy. 'I hate dogs, even our dog.'

'Stop wussing out, you egregious moronic spaz,' said Susanna.

Davy jumped up on the fence, too.

'Look bro,' said Davy, 'if you need to bail fast, I'll grab you and pull you up.' Susanna climbed up on the other side of Leroy.

Leroy jumped down and looked around.

'Doggy, doggy, doggy,' said Leroy.

'Ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf ruf!' yelled Susanna.

And poor Leroy nearly jumped out of his skin. Then his friend and sister laughed their asses off at him.

'Sorry dude,' said Davy, 'that was pretty damn funny.'

Davy and Susanna jumped down. Susanna wasted no time and jumped into the pool with her skateboard.

'Surfs up,' she said. Susanna skated up and down that pool, shooting through the small puddle on the bottom, spraying water everywhere. She seemed to wobble at first, 'cause the steep sides turned so sharply into the bottom that it was almost like hitting a brick wall, but she seemed to get the hang of it soon enough.

'The water's fine boys!' she yelled.

Leroy jumped in and started grinding the edge of the pool, while Davy stood on the edge, figuring there was only room for two.

'Yeah, yeah, you got grinding down,' said Susanna, jumping the air a little. 'Can't you get some air, Leroy?'

'Bullshit,' said Leroy. 'Grinding 's harder than anything you're doing.'

'Hey Leroy, take five,' said Davy. 'I can beat this little girl at her own game.'

Leroy jumped up on the side of the pool and Davy jumped down. Again and again those two kids rocketed past each other and did their best to jump and out-jump each other. They rarely jumped and hardly jumped that high but they kept each other entertained. It went on for several minutes, the tide turning back and forth between them, until it seemed like neither could outdo the other. Finally, when they both weren't paying attention, they started skating right toward each other and they both thought they were in for a collision. But they both put their hands out and caught each other hand in hand, and they spun around each other at the bottom of that pool until they let go and stumbled and fell. They laughed and Leroy looked on, smiling.

'That settles it; I was totally jumping higher than you,' said Susanna.

'No you weren't,' said Davy. 'You at your zenith were only as good as my mediocrity.'

'Whatever,' said Susanna, 'I'm not getting into one of your stupid arguments.'

'This is your stupid argument,' said Davy.

'It's your stupid argument.'

'It's your stupid argument and you're trying to start another one.'

'Blah blah blah yackity smackity,' said Susanna getting up.

Susanna climbed up the side of the pool and Leroy jumped in.

'Why don't you two dingleberries play spot the submarine,' said Susanna.

Soon Leroy got tired but Davy kept skating. Susanna, feeling she had skated enough, decided to do the other petty crime she always wanted to do.

She walked over to a big glass door, pulled out a can of spray paint and spelled out.

'RAIDER
NATIO...'

'What about the N?' asked Leroy, coming up behind her.

'Stop taking things so literally,' said Susanna. 'Besides I wrote it too big--there's no room for the N.'

'Maybe no one'll notice,' said Leroy.

'Aw screw it,' said Susanna. She then picked up a potted plant and threw it through the window, thinking only a real nerd would go to the trouble to put together that glass and find her spelling mistake.

Hearing that shatter made Davy lose his balance and stumble on the bottom of the pool. And then they heard that house wasn't so empty after all.

'Hello! Greg, is that you?'

'Uh-oh,' said Susanna. 'Der Kommissar's in town!'

'You said you checked the door,' said Leroy.

'Like I'd wuss out like that,' said Susanna. She lied about checking if anyone was in the house, if you haven't figured it out.

Leroy and Susanna went to either side of the pool, putting their hands out to pull Davy out and in making a split-second decision, of course, he wanted to grab the hand of the pretty girl, and that was a mistake. Just as Davy was about to grab her hand, that bitch pulled her hand back and laughed.

'Whoops.'

And that poor asshole tumbled backwards and as soon as he came to a rest he sat up and grabbed his leg and started to yell.

'God damn it!'

Susanna's eyes lit up and she laughed like a kid watching a cartoon.

'What do we do?' said Leroy.

'The right thing Leroy, the right thing,' said Susanna, and she jumped the fence and ran off.

'Sorry,' said Leroy as he jumped the fence and followed his sister.

Davy sat on the bottom of that pool until a little old lady looked over the side.

'Who, who are you?' she said.

'Um, um, I'm Greg's friend,' said Davy.

Later that day when Clark got home from work, he sat out on the couch in front of his house and started to drink a beer with Sharon. And like what happened many of those days, Davy's mother came over to sit with them.

When she'd talk to Clark, she mostly asked him about mannish things like how to fix things around the house or how to fix the lawn mower. Some of those things Clark knew about but a lot of them he didn't. But the one

thing she talked to him a lot about was what the hell was going on in her little boy's mind.

'How's it going, Amy?' said Clark.

'I'm fine,' she said, 'it's my stupid kid I'm worried about.'

'What'd he do this time?' said Clark.

'He fractured his leg,' she said.

The Morgans gasped.

'And that's the least of his problems,' she continued. 'He snuck into someone's back yard up on the hill to skateboard in their empty swimming pool.'

'That's how he hurt his leg?' said Clark. 'That's not so bad.'

'Yeah, but while he was up there he threw an expensive pot through an even more expensive window,' Davy's mother said. 'I don't know what the hell he was thinking. He's never just broke things for no reason. Every time I ask him about it, his answers just don't make any sense.'

'Yeah,' said Clark, 'he seems more like the guy to sneak in a window than break it.'

'That's funny, but I can't believe that a window could cost that much,' said Davy's mother.

'Look, I'll talk to him if you want,' said Clark. 'Even if you don't get why your kid does something, they can understand why you punish them.'

'Well he's kind of too old for me to spank him,' she said.

'When they're too old to spank they're old enough to have the crap beat out of them like an adult,' said Sharon.

'Just ground him or take something away, like his guitar or his art,' said Clark. 'That'll snap him out of it. You know what? Let us talk to our kids for a while. Maybe we can shed some light on this.'

Clark and Sharon went into their house and sat on their inside couch.

'What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear, "break things for no reason?"' asked Clark. Sharon nodded her head and stood up.

'Susanna!' yelled Sharon. 'Come here!'

'Let me talk to her first,' said Clark. 'She can't lie to me.'

Susanna sat between her two parents.

'Now Susanna,' said Clark, 'do you know anything about Davy's busted leg and a busted window?' And Susanna looked her father right in the eye and opened her mouth.

'I love you, Daddy.'

'She only calls you Daddy when she's done something wrong,' said Sharon.

They took Susanna back to her room.

'Let me guess, you and Davy went skateboarding and you broke that window in one of your fits and left Davy behind with that bad leg,' said Clark.

'Leroy was there, too,' said Susanna.

'Stool pigeon,' said Sharon.

'Susanna, why the hell do you do stuff like this?' asked Clark.

'I don't know,' said Susanna. She really didn't know.

'Is it because you're mad?' asked Clark.

'No,' said Susanna. She wasn't mad or mad.

'You have to have some kind of answer,' said Clark.

'I.. I.. I don't know.' said Susanna. She really didn't know.

'Well, whatever the reason, you're going to pay for that God damn window!' said Clark.

'And that flower pot,' said Sharon.

'Oh man,' said Susanna.

'Yeah, I bet that'll eat up a check or three from that burger stand,' said Clark, 'and you can't use that skateboard for a month.'

'A week!' said Susanna. 'That's not fair, Dad.'

'Life isn't fair, Susanna,' said Clark, 'and I said a month, you sneaky little punk.'

Susanna paid for that window and hated every penny of it. Clark made sure she paid it back, but he gave in and let her have her skateboard back in two weeks.

Chapter 14

Well soon enough Davy came over to the Morgans, at first to rub his cast in Susanna's face, but he and Susanna just got into one of their weird discussions again.

'So the thing is that, if you made a dog in two dimensional space,' said Susanna, sitting on the inside couch next to Davy and Calvin, 'the dog would be cut in half from its mouth to its butt.'

'Yeah, so that means that two dimensional space is too simple to support life, right?' said Davy.

'Yeah, but just think about that in reverse,' said Susanna. 'There could be things in the fourth dimension that are so complicated that to them we just look like stuff bouncing around.'

'It's hyper-life,' said Davy.

'Maybe we could be just a part of a four dimensional being, that we aren't even aware of,' said Susanna.

'What is wrong with you guys?' asked Calvin. 'You guys aren't normal.'

'Dude, what are you talking about?' said Susanna.

'Never mind,' said Calvin, 'I'm going to my room.' Calvin walked to his room. 'Man, she broke that boy's leg a week ago and he's already over it and back for more.' Calvin looked in his and Leroy's room and saw Leroy lying in his bed with Sheena curled up against him. 'Out of the frying pan,' said Calvin.

Calvin sat on his bed and did his best not to be disturbed by the young lovers while he read a magazine.

'Leroy?' asked Sheena. 'Have you ever been arrested?'

'No,' said Leroy, 'but one time, when I was walking down the street in the middle of the night, this cop car stopped next to me and shined a light on me, and I didn't know what to do, so I started dancing.'

'Dancing?' said Sheena. 'What did he do?'

'He looked at me and then drove away,' said Leroy.

'You're so funny,' said Sheena. Calvin started laughing. 'Will you shut up?' Sheena yelled at Calvin. 'Leroy? What's your ideal job?' she continued.

'I don't know, a zoo keeper,' said Leroy.

'A zoo keeper--that's so sweet,' said Sheena. Calvin started to giggle. 'What's your favorite animal?' said Sheena.

'Oh, like uh, the lobster,' said Leroy.

'Lobster--that's so Kool,' said Sheena. Calvin started giggling again. 'God damn it!' yelled Sheena at Calvin. 'What the hell is your problem?'

'What!?' said Calvin.

'Stop laughing!' said Sheena.

'I'm reading Mad Magazine, little miss,' said Calvin. 'It's not beyond a possibility that it might make me laugh a little.'

'Can't you read it somewhere else?' said Sheena.

'This is my room, dude,' replied Calvin.

'It's Leroy's room, too!' said Sheena. 'Can't you just shut up for ten minutes?'

'Fine, fine,' said Calvin, still giggling and getting up, 'I'll go somewhere else. Continue with the lobsters and what not.'

Calvin walked outside and sat on the outside couch next to his parents.

'You guys aren't talking about something incredibly stupid and annoying, are you?' asked Calvin.

'Your father was wondering if Higgins was really Robin Masters,' said Sharon.

'Um, I guess that's OK,' said Calvin.

'Sharon, think about it,' said Clark, 'the guy writes novels. It would be the perfect cover to pretend he was his own butler and spy on Tom Selleck.'

'But Clark, he could just keep a journal like Dr. Watson,' said Sharon, 'and Robin Masters could read it.'

'I don't know,' said Clark, 'you're probably not supposed to find out. I hate it when they do stuff like that.'

Then the youngest Morgan came out of the house to plead with his parents.

'Mom, Dad, you have to take me to ET; everyone has seen it at school,' said Danny.

'If everyone watched ET jump off a cliff, would you watch it too?' said Sharon.

'Yeah,' said Danny.

'Actually, that could be a pretty Kool movie,' said Sharon.

'Does Enos want to go?' said Clark.

'He said that movie is for babies,' said Danny.

And just then Susanna came out of the house with Davy on a crutch right behind her.

'You know,' said Davy to Susanna, 'we could take him. They're even playing it at the drive-in.'

And this made Clark's ears perk up.

'Nice try, smart guy,' said Clark. 'You think Susanna can watch Danny while he watches her? Susanna, go get Leroy. He's going with you tonight.'

'I don't know, Dad,' said Susanna. 'Leroy wants to go watch some other movie with Sheena tonight.'

'Clark, you should let Leroy go with Sheena,' said Sharon.

'I guess you're out of luck tonight, kid,' said Clark to Davy.

'Well wait,' said Davy, 'what about Calvin?'

'I don't think so,' said Calvin. 'I don't know if I can take anymore nerd talk from these two.'

'Think of it this way,' said Clark, 'maybe you'll get a chance to kick this kid's ass.'

‘Oh OK,’ said Calvin, ‘sounds like something everyone can enjoy.’

Now, as I mentioned before, Davy had a car. And it was a 1960 El Camino, if you can believe it. The only caveat was it was definitely not the car the old lady only drove on Sunday. It was the car a street racer drove to Maine from California every week, and the only reason he could afford it was the owner was on the verge of having it towed. If Davy was better with cars he could have restored it and sold it for a fortune, but he wasn’t. Some girls loved it and some girls hated it, and Davy wasn’t sure why he liked it. He thought it was a miracle it started when it did. But somehow it seemed like an old woman that was a supermodel when she was younger.

Susanna, Davy, Calvin and Danny piled in the front seat (which was the only seat) of that car and Davy started it up and it seemed to drive just fine for a couple of blocks, but then it piddled out. Clark and Sharon could even see the car from their front yard. Davy popped the hood.

‘Calvin, could you do me a big favor?’ asked Davy.

‘What, pee-wee?’ asked Calvin.

‘Could you hold open that metal flap da kine on top of the carburetor?’

‘Oh, so this is one of those kind of cars,’ said Calvin. But he got out and did what Davy said and that car started up and they drove down the road all the same.

When the foursome got to the drive-in and the El Camino pulled up to the entrance, Susanna and Danny were the only ones in the front seat. As Susanna pulled up to the sound box she kept singing to herself, ‘Breaking the law, breaking the law.’

And as she stopped, Calvin and Davy got out from under a tarp in the back and got in the front seat. Davy wasn’t rich.

Davy sat next to Susanna and handed her and Danny some Cokes, while Calvin opened a Budweiser he snuck in.

‘I can’t believe Spielberg made another movie about aliens,’ said Susanna.

‘Totally, this has got to be the last one,’ said Davy, ‘or else he’s just going to be known as, that alien guy.’

‘Totally,’ said Susanna.

‘You know what alien movie I hate? The Day the Earth Stood Still,’ said Davy. ‘I mean, he tells us not to have nuclear weapons, which sounds good at first, but then you find out he has a robot that can blow up the planet. What’s more, it almost does.’

‘Makes you wonder how many other planets they might have accidentally blown up,’ said Susanna.

‘Totally,’ said Davy. ‘I keep thinking aliens are just overused. And none of the movies seem that realistic.’

'Especially since humanoid aliens are practically, evolutionarily, impossible,' said Susanna.

'I always wondered about that,' said Davy.

'Totally,' said Susanna. 'The thing is, the universe is probably limited and random mutation can branch out and go in so many different directions that the form that aliens will probably take is unlimited. Just look at the squids and fish--they basically do the same thing, and look how different they are, and they're from the same planet. There's more than one way to skin a cat or make an animal. Then if you think that life is just extreme complexity, then aliens might be bizarre to the point we probably won't even know what we're looking at at first. Aliens might just seem like a natural force.' Susanna pointed to a paper being blown in the wind. 'Look, aliens might be doing that.'

'Would you guys shut up?' said Danny.

'Hardly anything's happened yet,' said Susanna.

Davy looked over and saw that Calvin was drifting off to beer bedtime, and Davy thanked his whimsical God.

'You know, it's kinda sweet that, like, your dad wants your brother to chaperone you,' said Davy.

'Yeah, I kinda think it's stupid,' said Susanna.

'Really?' said Davy. And you can imagine the breakthrough he thought he was on to.

'Yeah man,' said Susanna, 'they like, totally, like way overestimate your chances.' Rats! thought Davy.

'So I guess this is kinda like our first da...'

'No Davy!' said Susanna.

'Oh yeah I guess that time I bought you lun....'

'Davy!' said Susanna.

'I'm just kidding. God,' said Davy. 'So... overestimate my chances of what?'

'Everything,' said Susanna.

'Just wondering. Have you ever been kissed?' asked Davy.

'Many have tried,' said Susanna.

'Yeah, me too,' said Davy.

'Are you kidding?' said Susanna.

'You remember what I said before? Your ideal guy?'

'Yeah.'

'So am I?...'

'Well...'

'Are we?...'

'I don't know,' she smiled.

'I don't know.' Yes yes yes yes yes, thought Davy.

Davy looked at that pretty girl and wondered. Many times he had asked a girl if he could kiss her and she said no and she still let him kiss her anyway. Most of the time he tried not to ask 'cause he sensed a lot of girls

liked that better. But Susanna wasn't like other girls, he thought, and he had already seen what happened if he went where he wasn't wanted. But when he saw the light flash on her lips, as big and goofy as they were, he wanted them, and finally decided, what the hell. He leaned in.

Now Davy didn't know it, but if he snuck or forced a kiss right now it could put a kibosh on the whole damn thing. So what happened next was one of the luckiest things that ever happened to him. Danny started screaming his little head off. As the older kids in the car were snapped back to reality, they looked at Danny and figured instantly the lumpy, slimy, misshapen, monster Muppet that was ET, screaming his goat like yell, was way too much for Danny's little nerves to handle.

'Danny, it's just a movie,' said Calvin.

'Come on, Danny,' said Susanna, 'you weren't even scarred this much by Friday the 13th.'

Danny just kept screaming. Susanna finally grabbed him and started slapping him, but Danny just kept on screaming.

'I've done all I know how to do,' said Susanna.

'Shut that kid up! God!' yelled a guy somewhere in another car.

'Maybe we should just go,' said Calvin.

'OK, let me start it up,' said Davy. But the thing would only idle and run down. 'Uh, Calvin...'

'I'm on it, loser,' said Calvin. And when the car finally started up, Danny was still screaming and he didn't stop till he was convinced that they were never going back to that drive-in again.

When they got home Clark was waiting and as Susanna went to meet him, Davy couldn't help but be moved, 'cause he knew Clark had been sitting outside since they left.

Clark and the four kids came in the house and Sharon walked up to Danny with something behind her back.

'Danny, I heard you like ET so I got you THIS!' said Sharon as she held a big plush ET in front of Danny's face. And Danny relived every moment of that drive-in and ran to his room.

'What the hell is wrong with him?' asked Sharon.

'Oh, he's so excited,' said Susanna. 'Here, he trusts me, I'll take it to him.' And Susanna took that toy and went back to Danny's room. 'It's OK, Danny. ET just wants to... SUCK THE FLESH OFF YOUR BONES!' And Susanna chased that poor little boy all over the house with that toy.

Davy looked on as that beautiful woman tortured that boy and couldn't help but find it charming, as immature as it was.

'Come on, Davy,' said Sharon, 'come sit down.' Davy sat down next to Clark and Sharon and Calvin on the couch.

'So how's that leg?' said Clark.

'It really isn't that bad,' said Davy. 'I'll probably get out of it in a week or so. It's not really broken; it's just fractured a little.'

'Leroy isn't back. Why are you guys home so soon?' said Sharon.

'Oh yeah,' said Davy, 'that movie scared the hell out of Danny. He screamed so much we had to leave early.' Clark laughed.

'Really?' said Sharon. 'Oh, so I guess he really doesn't like that doll.'

Davy stayed and talked to the Morgan parents. He mostly talked to Sharon about his mother and talked to Clark about the guitar. Finally, they talked to him about Susanna.

'You're still gonna say you don't like her?' said Clark.

'We like talk a lot, but I don't know,' said Davy. 'I'm really surprised how smart she can be.'

'Well when you know, you better let me know,' said Clark, "cause you're not going to like it if I just find out.'

'Yes sir,' said Davy.

They talked for a while until Davy felt the conversation was a null and eventually left with good will.

That night Clark sat on his daughter's bed as she lay down for the night.

'How's it going with that boy?' said Clark.

'I don't know, Dad. We talk a lot but I don't know,' she replied. 'Do you think that matters?'

'Talking? It doesn't hurt,' said Clark. 'Just take it as slow as you can, and do it right.' He stroked her head with his hand and she held his hand to her cheek. They stared at each other until Clark got up and started to go out the door but he met Danny coming in.

'Susanna?' said Danny. 'Can I sleep with you tonight? I'm scared.'

'What about Enos?' said Susanna.

'He says I'm acting like a baby,' said Danny. Clark folded his arms and listened.

'You are acting like a baby,' said Susanna. 'Why do you want to sleep with me? I've been scaring you all night.'

'That's it,' said Danny, 'you're way scarier than ET; you'll keep him away.'

Susanna smiled. 'That is so bizarre, and yet so sweet, and yet so gay.'

Clark looked on as his youngest son fell asleep in the arms of his only daughter and he went to bed.

The next day Susanna, Davy, Leroy and Sheena were sitting on the outside couch.

'Man like, the Dark Crystal, was way better than ET,' said Leroy.

'Yeah, I don't know,' said Davy, 'we had to leave during the movie.'

'See man, there's like, this one part of The Dark Crystal,' said Leroy, 'where there's these Elf kids or something and then they were riding these giraffe-rabbit things and then they fight these giant crab things.'

‘That doesn’t sound right dude,’ said Susanna. ‘You’re just saying that ‘cause you like crabs.’

‘No that’s right; that was actually in the movie,’ said Sheena, ‘and he likes lobsters not crabs.’

Chapter 15

Now for the rest of his life Danny never liked ET, never. He would watch horror movie after horror movie and never be as afraid as he was of the squishy little alien. But as much as he hated ET, there was another movie he loved.

'Ghostbusters!' yelled Danny, as he rewound the tape and played it over again.

'Oh my God,' said Sharon, 'how many times are you gonna watch this movie?'

'I do kind of like how the movie is really dark,' said Susanna, 'and yet it's all funny at the same time, but not to the point where it's unbelievable. Well, not beyond what it already is. And I like how they use science to deal with ghosts. I don't think that's ever been done before. It's like how The Time Machine was the first story to use science to time travel. Plus I like how they don't just help themselves and don't just help other people. They do both.'

'But again?' said Sharon, 'I'd change it to the TV but they canceled Happy Days.'

'Maybe it's better they did,' said Susanna. 'Sometimes I think people just get nostalgic when they have no hope for the future. And not everything was better back then.'

But as Danny's obsession with Ghostbusters became annoying, Susanna heard something one day that tickled her bones.

'Danny!' said Susanna, 'the Ghostbusters song is just a rip-off of A New Kind of Drug!'

'No it's not!' said Danny.

'Yes it is!' said Susanna. 'Everything you love or believe in is a lie!'

'No no no!' said Danny. Danny ran to his room and started playing his Ghostbusters audio tape, and Susanna started playing her New Kind of Drug tape.

'They don't sound the same to me,' said Clark.

Clark heard a knock on the door. He opened it and saw Sheena's mother holding Leroy by the arm.

'Does this little hillbilly belong to you?' she said.

'What did he do?' asked Clark.

'I found your pot head, hoodlum son in my daughter's room!' she said.

'Mrs. Evans, I'm very sorry about my son, and I assure you that I am going to punish him severely.'

Clark took Leroy into the house and said goodbye to Mrs. Evans. Clark looked at Leroy and Leroy cringed.

'Dad, I'm like really sorry,' said Leroy. 'I was just so stupid and I don't know what to say.'

Clark walked slowly over to him and Leroy was sure that his father was going to beat the crap out of him. But Clark grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

'I knew you could do it, son!' said Clark, bobbing his head up and down like he was about ready to start jumping.

Leroy looked like he had just narrowly dodged a car and was more relieved than he had been in a long time. 'Thanks Dad... oh God.' Susanna came out to see what was going on.

'Now if I did something like that,' said Susanna, 'you'd kick the shit out of me.'

'Life isn't fair Susanna,' said Clark, 'but I'd probably just kick the shit out of your boyfriend, or shoot him. Besides, I think Leroy needs a push in the other direction sometimes.'

Now for a while Leroy had been spending time at Sheena's apartment, and they pretty much had free range of the place since her mother was always working and her brother was off doing God knows what, and he wasn't really as protective of Sheena as Susanna's brothers were of her. Mostly they listened to music, Punk Rock mostly, which was the favorite of both of them. Now unlike most kinds of music, Punk Rock wasn't played on the radio that much; in fact, Punk Rock was about as hard to find on the radio as Zydeco, Bluegrass and Ragtime, which Leroy also liked but hadn't got the courage to tell Sheena yet.

Sheena had a cabinet filled with neat piles of audio tapes of every popular punk band, and some that weren't that popular. And like Susanna, Sheena even liked the Cure, but she preferred their older stuff. Now when I say that pile was neat, I mean neat, and in those plastic cases they came in. Because to Sheena they were her most prized possessions and one of the few things that gave her inspiration to not be controlled.

First thing Sheena would do when Leroy came over was to try and pick a tape he hadn't heard yet, and then explain to Leroy what the song meant and what the band's inspirations were. As soon as that conversation would fizzle out, Leroy would help Sheena with her homework. Leroy wasn't really smarter than Sheena by any means, but Sheena discovered that if she explained the problems she was having that she somehow started to understand them better than she had been.

But of course the real reason Leroy and Sheena met at her apartment was to kiss. They'd sometimes sit for hours in each other's arms, just kissing. Kissing playfully, kissing passionately, and sometimes they'd kiss as if they were trying to put strength in each other or draw strength out. They would kiss and the rest of the world didn't mean nothing. All the judgments of their cruel classmates and their idiotic teachers didn't matter; there was only one other person who mattered and often this made them laugh. For they felt like they found a loophole to the harsh judgments of the world. Now if you think this made them unmotivated, you're wrong. The truth was they were both

getting better grades and doing better at work and socializing than either had done in a long time. Somehow knowing that they were important to one other person made them feel important and made them act important and expect important things from themselves. And when they felt they couldn't kiss anymore they would put their faces up against each other's and breathe in each other's breath. Sometimes they would just smile at each other, amazed that a dream that they both had had was finally coming true.

But every silver lining has a cloud. One day while Leroy and Sheena were kissing, Sheena raised her head to the sound of a car door shutting outside.

'What is it?' said Leroy.

'Ummm,' said Sheena, squinting her eyes, 'it's nothing.' They started kissing again. But then Sheena heard footsteps coming down the walkway outside her apartment and she recognized them instantly.

'God damn it, that's my mom!' said Sheena.

'Really?' said Leroy.

'Yes really,' said Sheena, 'and if she finds you here she'll kill us both!'

'Maybe I could say I'm the cable guy,' said Leroy.

'No... no, no, no,' said Sheena. 'Here, hide in this closet.' She shoved him in a closet.

'Sheena, there's a tree in here,' said Leroy.

'So?' said Sheena.

'I'm kind of allergic to evergreen trees,' said Leroy.

'Leroy, that's a fake Christmas tree. It isn't real, it's made out of plastic!' said Sheena as she closed the closet door.

The front door opened and Mrs. Evans walked through the door.

'You playing that heathen music again?' said Mrs. Evans.

'Mom, it never says in the Bible that "you shall go to hell if thou if listen to Bad Brains,"' said Sheena.

'That's blasphemy!' said Mrs. Evans.

'No Mom, that's sarcasm,' said Sheena.

'Don't think I don't know anything,' said Mrs. Evans. 'I know one of those guys is called Richard Hell.'

'Mom, that's like a totally different band,' said Sheena, 'but I have to admit that's harder to defend. Besides, what are you doing home so early?'

'What the hell kind of question is that?' said Mrs. Evans. 'This is my house, whose permission do I need to come home to my own house?'

'Mom, you know I don't mean it like that,' said Sheena, 'I just--you've never been home this early.'

'I've gotten a promotion and a raise,' said Mrs. Evans, looking relieved as she sat down. 'I've decided to try and spend more time, now that I can, with you and Antoine. Where is he, anyway?'

'God man,' said Sheena, 'I don't know; I wish I did.'

They heard a sneeze.

'What the hell is that?' said Mrs. Evans.

'Uh, the neighbors. These walls are so thin I swear to God I heard a whole discussion on how to make homemade Twinkies,' said Sheena. They heard another sneeze and a ruckus in the closet.

Mrs. Evans jumped up and opened the closet door and found Leroy under the tree.

'Uh... timber?' said Leroy.

'Oh my God,' said Mrs. Evans.

'Leroy, I told you that was a plastic tree!' said Sheena.

And then from there you remember Sheena's mother dragging Leroy back to the Morgan house.

That was the first major run-in Leroy had with Mrs. Evans, but sadly and gladly it wasn't the last. One day when Mrs. Evans arrived home early as she was more inclined to do now, she walked in on Leroy holding one of Sheena's bras, and he only put it down to pick up one of Sheena's panties. This was beyond the pale for Mrs. Evans and she reacted on the first instinct she had: she beat the crap out of that boy.

'Mom, what the hell are you doing?' yelled Sheena, desperately trying to intervene.

'This hillbilly, hoodlum pervert was going through your underwear,' said Mrs. Evans.

'Mom! He was doing my laundry!'

'He was what?!' said Mrs. Evans.

'He was doing my laundry...' reiterated Sheena, looking embarrassed. Mrs. Evans looked around and saw two laundry baskets, one full of whites and one full of colors. And then she looked back at her daughter.

'You make your boyfriend do your laundry?!' yelled Mrs. Evans.

'Well... uh... well, what's wrong with that?' said Sheena. 'A lot of the guys at school make their girlfriends do their laundry.'

Now if you didn't notice, Sheena didn't say, "He's not my boyfriend."

That same night Leroy cooked for Sheena's family and Mrs. Evans, Antoine, Sheena and Leroy sat down to roast beef and mashed red potatoes.

'This just seems so weird,' said Mrs. Evans.

'I don't know, Mom,' said Antoine, 'these potatoes are softer than any I had before.'

Chapter 16

One day Sharon got a mania in her that made her obsessed with spicy food, and in a discussion with Davy's mother, Davy's mother mentioned curry. Sharon persisted with the idea of curry until Davy's mother decided to show her how to make a chicken curry dish.

Davy's mother, Sharon and Susanna were all standing around the island at Davy's house (which was pretty similar to the Morgan house, only mirrored and with three bedrooms instead of four) following the directions of a recipe Davy's mother knew by heart.

Sharon was cutting up multi-colored bell peppers and tomatoes and Susanna was cutting up a chicken, which was pretty much why she wanted to be there.

'Did your mother teach you this recipe, Amy?' asked Sharon.

'My mother? No,' said Davy's mother. 'My mother wasn't that good a cook, believe it or not, but it worked out 'cause she hardly had much to work with anyway. I learned it in the restaurant I worked at. I got a job there when I was a kid mainly 'cause I thought you'd always have food if you worked at a restaurant. They made me work in the kitchen so I knew all of their dishes off the top of my head.'

'Is it always made with chicken?' said Sharon.

'Well, I made it with snake meat sometimes,' said Davy's mother, 'all though that's hard to get in this country unless you go down to Tijuana or something.'

'Oh, rattlesnake is good,' said Sharon. 'I ran over a rattlesnake once and brought him home and he was good. Although when I got him home he came back to life, and I had to go get the Glock and finish him.'

'Oh God, I hate those things,' said Davy's mother. 'I found one in the backyard here once.'

'Did you like cooking?' said Sharon.

'I hated it. Everyone in that kitchen was an asshole. I think I like cooking for myself and friends but I hated doing it as a job. Sometimes I think I learned English just so I could be a waitress. That's where I met David's father.'

Susanna looked at Davy's mother, trying to read her sad face, as if she could somehow read her mind and learn something about that mysterious boy and his even more mysterious parents. When Davy's mother noticed Susanna was looking at her, she smiled and Susanna smiled back. They seemed lost in each other's eyes and God knows how long they would have looked at each other if Davy's mother didn't see Sharon out of the corner of her eye dip a piece of pepper in the curry powder and put it in her mouth.

'SHARON NO!' yelled Davy's mother.

'What?' said Sharon as she chewed the pepper nonchalantly until her eyes grew wider than saucer dishes. 'Oh my God, this is the spiciest thing I've ever eaten in my life. God damn It!'

Sharon grabbed her beer and chugged it like a college student.

'That didn't help at all!' said Sharon. She started jogging in place and stuck her tongue out. 'I think I'm having a heart attack.' Susanna started laughing. Davy's mother looked simultaneously amused and concerned as she held Sharon with one arm and patted her on the shoulder with the other.

'You're not having a heart attack,' she said with a smile. 'It's just really, really spicy.'

Sharon looked around the kitchen and saw the open can of coconut milk they were going to use later and she grabbed it and drank it all.

'Oh, I think that helped,' said Sharon, sniffing.

'Mom, we needed that,' said Susanna.

'It's OK,' said Davy's mother, 'that stuff'll make you drink anything. If we ever get this made, it won't really be as spicy as the actual powder.'

Sharon grabbed another slice of pepper and was about to dip it in the powder again.

'Sharon!' said Davy's mother. 'What the hell are you thinking?'

Sharon stopped, looking embarrassed. 'Sharon...' Davy's mother shook her head and smiled.

'Mom...' said Susanna, holding her mother.

Suddenly Danny came through the front door.

'Mom?' said Danny. 'Enos called and said that you left him at the grocery store again.'

'Sharon...' Davy's mother shook her head and smiled again.

'Really?' said Sharon. 'God damn it, at least I have a reason to go back to the store and get more coconut milk. I just wish I didn't feel so loopy.'

'That's a side effect from the curry,' said Davy's mother.

'That beer didn't help either. I'll drive, Mom,' said Susanna.

As Susanna and Sharon left, Susanna's eyes met Davy's mother's again.

Sharon and Susanna arrived at the supermarket and Sharon went in and returned with a can of coconut milk and told Susanna to start up the VW.

'Mom,' said Susanna, 'aren't you forgetting something?'

'God damn it,' said Sharon. She went in the store and returned with Enos.

As they drove away Enos started with his usual complaints.

'How can you do that?' said Enos. 'How can you do that? How can you forget your... your own son?'

'Enos, you're just not that noticeable,' said Sharon.

'Susanna! You didn't forget,' said Enos. 'Why didn't you say something?'

'Uh,' said Susanna, 'I was preoccupied.'

'NO, you weren't!' said Enos. 'You always do that; you never remind her about me on purpose 'cause it's another way for you to give me crap!' Enos was right about that. You see, if you haven't figured it out yet, Susanna

and Enos where the two smartest Morgan children by far. This in some ways gave them a special bond, but in a lot of other ways this cultivated a rivalry. Susanna won most of the time 'cause she was older, and being the only girl was privileged to a lot of things that Enos would never enjoy. But Enos was showing signs that he was going to catch up one of these days.

'I'm not going to listen to your paranoid conspiracies,' said Susanna. 'Besides, you shouldn't wander off whenever we go out.'

'Yeah,' said Sharon, 'why do you always do that so much? I'm still not sure I like you walking around alone so much. You're still kind of young and this is still God damn California, not Mayberry. Do I have to tell you kids that story again, about how your father was stabbed by the Cribs? And that Zodiac Murderer--they never caught that guy, you know. They're not even sure what he looks like. He could have been in that store and you wouldn't know it.' Clark actually was stabbed by gangsters in a robbery once, but he gave one of those sons of bitches a grade two concussion.

'Yeah, well you left Danny home alone just now,' said Enos.

'He's got Shere Khan and the shotgun,' said Sharon, 'and Amy is right next door.'

'I know why Enos likes to run off alone,' said Susanna. 'He runs to the magazine section to look at those Sports Illustrated swimsuit magazines.'

'I do not!' said Enos. 'I was reading National Geographic.'

'Yeah, to look at those naked Congo girls,' said Susanna.

'Shut the hell up, Susanna!' said Enos.

'That's right, Mom,' said Susanna, 'He's totally getting to be that age. Better knock when you go in his room from now on.'

'Oh my God,' said Sharon, 'that's right around the corner isn't it?'

'What is wrong with you guys?' said Enos.

'I just hope he isn't as bad as you were, Susanna,' said Sharon.

Susanna started to look panicky. 'God, I never knew girls could go at it like you did. You were like a God damn zoo monkey. It must be all that strong male blood.'

'MOM!' yelled Susanna. 'JESUS CHRIST!'

'Watch the road, Susanna! You'll never get that drivers license this way!' Susanna swerved back to her lane. 'Besides, I'm your mother,' said Sharon, 'and besides, Enos doesn't know what I'm talking about.'

'Mom, that was horrible,' Susanna looked like she was about to cry. 'How the hell does she even know?'

Enos was laughing his little ass off. He relished any discomfort his sister suffered, even though he really didn't completely understand what they were talking about, but he was on the verge.

The next day Enos was sitting in the mess hall of his school eating food off the tray he had, and two little girls sat on the other side of the table.

'Your name is Enos, right?' said one little girl.

'I don't know,' said Enos.

‘That’s funny, how you pretended that you didn’t know your own name,’ said the girl. ‘I remember, your name is Enos.’

‘So my name is Enos! You want to fight about it?’ Enos was constantly having people make fun of his name, and that was the main reason why he was always getting in fights at school. And it didn’t help it was the same name as one of the stupid cops on *The Dukes of Hazard*.

‘Oh no,’ said the little girl. ‘I know how Tommy always teases you about your name and that’s stupid. I know it’s from the Bible.’

‘Yeah,’ said Enos.

‘My name is Roni and that’s from the Bible too--well kinda. And people make fun of it all the time,’ said Roni.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Enos remembering, ‘you’re “Rice a Roni.”’

‘I named my wagon leader RicARoni in computer class,’ said the other girl.

Roni laughed nervously. ‘You’re so funny Enos. Have you done something with your hair? It’s been looking better recently.’

‘Uh... No,’ said Enos.

‘I think it’s great that your friends with Steven,’ said Roni.

Enos looked at the fat ugly kid next to him that apparently was named Steven.

‘He’s not my friend,’ said Enos. ‘I don’t have friends, I don’t want friends, I don’t need friends.’

‘Yeah, he’s not my friend,’ said Steven. ‘He beats me up all the time. He steals my lunch money ‘cause his sister is always stealing his lunch and his mom always forgets to make a lunch.’

‘Dude, shut the hell up,’ said Enos.

‘Once he even stole my Garbage Pail Kids cards.’

‘Shut up!’ said Enos.

‘I think that’s funny,’ said Roni, ‘how you guys tease each other. I think it’s great that you’re friends with Steven. You know Steven has a tree house and a pool.’

‘Yeah,’ said Steven, ‘I have a tree house and a pool.’

‘See,’ said Roni.

‘So?’ said Enos. ‘What the hell is so great about a tree house? Who walks down the street and looks up in a tree and says, “Oh boy, let’s build a house up in that tree, and it better not have plumbing ‘cause that’s just stupid.”’

‘That’s funny,’ said Roni. ‘You’re so funny. Hey Steven, did you meet my friend Clarice?’

‘Hi Enos,’ said Clarice (the other girl).

‘Don’t talk to Enos!’ said Roni. ‘You’re supposed to talk to Steven!’

‘Jeez man,’ said Clarice.

‘Did you hear that, Steven?’ said Roni. ‘Clarice wants to see your tree house.’

‘Really?’ said Steven.

'Yeah,' said Clarice, 'tree houses are kinda Kool.'

'See Steven,' said Roni, 'you should bring your friend Enos to see your tree house. And Clarice and I should come with you when you see Steven's tree house.'

'Does the tree house have plumbing?' said Clarice.

'When have you ever heard of a tree house with plumbing?' said Enos. 'I just told you it didn't have plumbing.'

'I don't know,' said Clarice.

'Don't talk to Enos!' said Roni.

'God,' said Clarice, 'don't be such a spaz.'

Later that day, after school, Enos went to Steven's house, along with Roni and Clarice, and they found Steven's tree house really wasn't that. It was a platform on some stilts that just happened to be next to a tree. There was an extension ladder for the kids to climb up into it.

Once up in Steven's quote unquote tree house, all the kids looked clueless as to what they were there for, except for Roni.

'Look,' said Roni, talking to Steven, 'girls aren't allowed in tree houses owned by boys unless they kiss the boy, that's the law.'

'So are you supposed to kiss me?' said Steven.

'Not me, you idiot!' said Roni. 'You're supposed to kiss Clarice.'

'Wait! What?!' said Clarice. 'I don't want to have Steven's baby.'

'Why not?' said Steven.

'You won't have his baby!' said Roni. 'Just don't use your tongue like in those movies.'

Steven and Clarice stared at each other, summoning their courage, while Roni crawled over to Enos, who was at the edge staring out over the neighborhood.

'It's so Kool how you just stare like that,' said Roni. 'That's so Goth.'

'What?' said Enos.

'Uh, I think that's Kool,' said Roni. 'Remember when Jason was all punching you and you just took it until you grabbed his arm and twisted it and he fell on his knees and started crying?'

'I used to be scarred of that guy,' said Enos.

'That was Kool,' said Roni. They sat next to each other for the longest time, just staring out over the neighborhood, until Roni leaned over and kissed Enos on the lips.

'What are you doing?' said Enos.

'I have to,' said Roni. 'I'm in a boy's tree house.'

'That rule is crap, cliché crap,' said Enos, 'besides, you knew that before you came here.'

'I know,' said Roni giggling, 'but what's wrong with that if it gets you what you want?' Then Enos remembered something that Calvin always told him: "If it's stupid and it works then it's not stupid."

'OK Steven,' said Clarice, 'I'm only going to kiss you if you blow your nose first.'

The next day when Enos and Danny opened their front door to go to school, that little girl Roni was waiting outside.

'What are you doing here?' said Enos.

'I wondered if you could walk me the rest of the way to school?' said Roni.

'What are you talking about?' said Enos. 'You live closer to the bus stop than I do.'

'Well then, you should start stopping at my house,' said Roni.

Sharon thought she heard the sounds of a little girl and came over to the front door and started eavesdropping on the Enos's conversation, until she couldn't contain herself anymore.

'Ooohhh Enos,' said Sharon, 'you have a littler girlfriend.'

'Yes, I'm his girlfriend!' said Roni. 'We kissed so I'm his girlfriend and when we grow up I'm going to marry him!'

Danny started laughing.

'Ooohhh Enos,' said Sharon.

'I'm not your girlfri... boyfriend!' said Enos, 'and I'll never marry you, I'm never getting married!'

'Don't say that Enos,' said Sharon. 'You're getting married someday or I'll never speak to you again.'

'See,' said Roni, 'we're getting married someday. Your mom said so.'

'Oh my God,' said Enos.

'Now go to school with your little girlfriend,' said Sharon, 'and tell me all about it when you get back. OK?' Sharon winked.

'Mom, she's not...' said Enos, looking into his mother's eyes, '...aw, God damn it!'

Enos walked to the bus stop with Danny and Roni, and Enos was disgusted. But something in him felt happy 'cause he knew that this was the most attention his mother had given him in a long time.

Later that day, when Enos and Danny got home from school, Enos looked completely run down. They walked into the house and found their mother and Calvin sitting on the couch watching TV.

'Mom, can I watch cartoons?' said Enos. 'I really need to relax.'

'No honey, we're watching Donahue,' said Sharon.

'Yeah Donahue, pee-wee,' said Calvin. 'They're talking to a lady that fooled around with an alien.'

'How do you guys watch that guy?' said Enos. 'He's such a pretentious prick.'

'Enos, where did you hear that word?' said Sharon.

'What, prick?' said Enos.

'No, pretentious,' said Sharon.

'On Donahue,' said Enos.

'I rest my case,' said Sharon. 'Now go to your room. I don't want you to watch this episode. And don't worry; I'm taping your cartoons.'

'Oh my God,' said Enos, walking to his room with Danny.

Enos and Danny stayed in their room for a couple of hours, Enos doing his homework, until Clark and Sharon walked in the room.

'Hey Danny,' said Sharon, 'go watch TV with your brothers and sister.'

'Enos, you stay here,' said Clark, letting Danny out the door before he closed it, 'we need to talk to you.'

'Am I in trouble?' said Enos.

'No,' said Clark, 'it's just something we have to talk about.'

Danny walked out to the couch and sat next to Calvin, Leroy and Susanna, watching TV.

'Where's Enos?' said Leroy.

'He's in our room,' said Danny, 'Mom and Dad wanted to talk to him alone.'

The kids sat and watched TV for a couple more minutes until Susanna sat up.

'Oh my God,' said Susanna, 'they're giving Enos, "THE TALK."'

'Jesus Christ,' said Calvin laughing. Susanna went into the kitchen and tossed Calvin and Leroy glasses.

'Come on guys,' said Susanna, 'and be quiet.'

'Why do we want to hear that?' asked Leroy.

'Cause Enos doesn't want us to hear it, stupid,' said Susanna.

The three snuck down the hallway and put the glasses up against the door and started listening.

'So you understand what we're talking about?' said Sharon.

'Yeah,' said Enos, 'to tell you the truth, it makes sense. Now those nature shows make a lot more sense.'

'Do you have any questions?' asked Clark.

'So does everybody do that?' asked Enos.

'Everyone but losers,' said Sharon.

'Sharon. Most people do sooner or later Enos,' said Clark.

'So you guys did it,' said Enos.

'Boy, did we ever,' said Sharon.

'So Han Solo and Princess Leia?' said Enos.

'Yes,' Clark and Sharon said together.

'Sam and Dian?' said Enos.

'Yes,' Clark and Sharon said together.

'Cyndi Lauper and Andre the Giant?' said Enos.

'Yes,' Clark and Sharon said together.

'Cyndi Lauper and Andre the Giant?' whispered Susanna outside the door half giggling.

“That alien and that lady on Donahue?” said Enos.

“There’s no such thing as aliens,” said Clark.

“Well, there could be aliens,” said Sharon, narrowing her eyes and looking away.

“Sharon, let’s not digress too much,” said Clark.

“Oh yeah. Look,” said Sharon, “we’re telling you this ‘cause we want you to only do it when you’re married and madly in love, or at least you should try to really hard.”

“If a man seduces a virgin woman, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife,” said Clark, “and “you shalt not commit adultery.””

“Look Enos,” said Sharon, “I’m not proud of everything I’ve done in my life, but one of the few things I am proud of is that I’ve only been with one man in my entire life.”

“Who?” said Enos.

“Me, you smart ass,” said Clark.

“So even people in the Bible did it,” said Enos.

“Oh yeah,” said Sharon, “King David had like forty wives or something.”

“What about Jesus?” said Enos.

“Well that’s kind of iffy,” said Clark, “but probably not, but he’s a special case if there ever was one.”

“Is there anything else you don’t understand?” said Sharon.

“I don’t know,” said Enos, “but I think I got it.”

Clark and Sharon grabbed their son and had him sit on the bed with them, and they hugged him and stroked his long dark brown hair. Clark looked at the door, getting ready to leave, and noticed shadows in the crack between door and the floor. Clark walked quietly over to the door and opened it suddenly. Calvin, Leroy and Susanna stumbled and almost fell over.

“What in the name of God do you three think you’re doing?!” said Clark.

“Susanna!” yelled Enos, “what the hell is wrong with you?!”

“You know Dad,” said Susanna, “I think you guys totally should have had this talk when Enos took my Barbie Doll and tore the clothes off.”

“That wasn’t me!” said Enos, “that was... was... Leroy.”

“What me?” said Leroy, “no way man.”

Clark started slapping those three on the head and made them scatter.

Some weeks later Clark and Sharon started to wonder if they told Enos about the birds and the bees too early because the principal at his school called them up. The man told them that a history report Enos wrote was nothing but pornography. Soon one night Clark and Sharon walked into Enos’s class room to talk to his teacher.

A Miss O’Reilly had them sit on those tiny elementary school chairs and she sat on her desk and started talking to them.

'Look I just want to say,' said O'Reilly, 'that I really like your son, and I think he's one of the best students I have.'

'Is he doing all right in math?' asked Clark. That was really the only thing he cared about.

'He's doing great,' said O'Reilly. 'He's one of the best in the class by far.'

'So what's the problem?' said Clark.

'There're a lot of problems' said O'Reilly, 'I... please bear with me; this is a lot to go through. First I need to ask you, do you help Enos with his homework?'

'Well, a little,' said Clark.

'I help him with grammar and spelling,' said Sharon, 'but a lot of the stuff he talks about I have a hard time understanding.'

'I have a hard time too,' said O'Reilly. 'I've had to go to the library several times just to check on the things he's written about.'

'Really, we're not writing his reports if that's what you think,' said Clark.

'That's good,' said O'Reilly, 'but I'm sorry to say that some of the stuff he writes about isn't appropriate for school.'

'Like what?' said Clark.

'He wrote a report on the on the history of sexuality in art,' said O'Reilly.

'He did what?' said Clark.

'He said that certain sexual displays in art from Leonardo to Thomas Eakins and Frank Frezetta help induce "Ego Projection" and help people function in society.'

'Well that doesn't sound so bad,' said Clark.

'I know,' said O'Reilly, 'but we can't have students talking about sex.'

'But we saw on the news that teachers where teaching kids about condoms and such,' said Sharon.

'Look, teachers can talk about sex but students can't,' said O'Reilly, 'that's just the way things are. I'm sorry. Another thing was that he did a report on the Renaissance, specifically on Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther and John Calvin.'

'He loves the renaissance,' said Clark.

'I know,' said O'Reilly, 'but we can't have students writing about religion and religious leaders.'

'But they shaped world history,' said Clark.

'Yes, but we can't have students write or talk about religion,' said O'Reilly. 'I'm sorry. A couple days ago, we were talking about the poem, The Raven, and Enos said it was about a man that sold his soul to the devil.'

'But that is what it's about,' said Clark.

'Yes, but you can't say that in school,' said O'Reilly.

'This even goes back to two book reports he did,' the teacher said. 'He wrote about The Grapes of Wrath as an example of Modernism. And a

report on The Lord of the Rings,' said O'Reilly, 'as an example of... well... He said it was wrongfully classified as Fantasy, Romanticism, and Postmodernism but is better classified as "Neo Ad Fontes". I'm not even sure what that is. I asked him what "Ego Projection" and "Neo Ad Fontes" were and he said that he got it from his sister.'

'Of course,' said Clark, 'his sister is screwing him up.'

'That brings me to the other thing I have questions about,' said O'Reilly, 'on some of his bibliographies he listed his sister.'

'He did what?' said Clark. 'That's... that's... interesting.'

'Even when he wrote about those books he talked too much about religion,' said O'Reilly.

'But there is religion those books,' said Clark.

'I know, but I've had a lot of kids do reports on those books and not mention religion,' said O'Reilly.

'Those kids sound pretty stupid,' said Clark.

'Look I'm trying to be nice. The principal wants me to flunk him. But I'm going to give him a passing grade,' said O'Reilly.

'But were they good reports,' said Clark.

'They were,' said O'Reilly, 'but you can't talk about religion and you can't talk about sex in school. And you can't reference people that aren't published authors or recognized by a major college or use words and ideas that aren't already written about.'

'Can we talk to the principal?' said Clark.

'He won't talk to you about this,' said O'Reilly. 'I'm sorry.'

As the Morgan parents drove home in the Nissan they couldn't help but complain about the complaints of the school.

'How can he not talk about religion when talking about The Grapes of Wrath?' said Sharon. 'One of the main characters is a preacher.'

'We've got idiots in charge of our kids,' said Clark. 'Even that teacher knows it, but she's too afraid to say anything.'

At home Clark and Sharon talked about the reports Enos had written. And Susanna overheard a lot of what they said and started to think that they sounded familiar. She barged into Enos's room to complain.

'Look, I don't know how, but you've been ripping me off,' said Susanna.

'What are you talking about?' said Enos.

'You've been ripping off my old school papers,' said Susanna. 'One was even about the Nile versus the Tigris and Euphrates and how that influenced the religions of the Egyptians versus the Sumerians. And "Ego Projection" and "Neo Ad Fontes"--those are my words. I invented them.'

'Susanna, I wasn't ripping you off,' said Enos. 'I was referencing you.'

'You what?' said Susanna.

'I even listed you in my bibliography,' said Enos.

‘But how did you even remember some of this stuff?’ said Susanna.

‘I’ve kept them,’ said Enos. He opened a drawer and took out piles of papers in Susanna’s hand writing, all stapled or paper clipped together. Susanna walked over and picked them up and recognized them. Every paper she had decided to throw out or left neglected for the last four years, Enos had kept. Now that’s something.

‘I wrote some of these years ago,’ said Susanna.

‘Susanna, I couldn’t leave them to be thrown away,’ said Enos. ‘Some of them are so brilliant, you can’t let them just die.’

‘They’re not that great,’ said Susanna.

‘I’m glad I read them,’ said Enos.

Susanna almost felt like she was having an out of body experience. After all the crap she gave her brother, he loved her, her respected her and he idolized her. He idolized her more than anyone in the world. Susanna’s anger dissipated. She walked over to Enos and kissed him on the cheek, hugged him and slapped him on the head playfully.

In the years that followed Susanna’s and Enos’s rivalry was interrupted every now and then when they had discussions about things the other Morgans didn’t understand. They had a special bond.

The following day Sharon walked Enos to the door to see him off, and as she hoped, Roni was waiting for him.

‘Oh hi Enos,’ said Roni, ‘did your sister steal your lunch again?’

‘No, she’s mellowed out the last couple days,’ said Enos.

‘Did your mom remember to make you a lunch?’ asked Roni.

‘Yeah, yeah, she did.’ Enos looked to his mother and she smiled. He then looked back at Roni. ‘Did you do something with your hair?’

‘No,’ said Roni.

‘It just looks better somehow,’ said Enos.

‘Really?’ said Roni.

Sharon looked on as Enos and Danny walked to the bus stop with Roni.

That night at the dinner table, Sharon asked Enos about Roni, as she did almost every night. And while Enos was feeling uncomfortable, Danny decided to make things even more uncomfortable.

‘Susanna’ said Danny, ‘why do you have those bumps on your chest?’

Susanna looked shocked and embarrassed.

‘He doesn’t remember,’ said Sharon to Clark. ‘I guess I put him on formula earlier than I thought.’

‘I uh... uh... I,’ said Susanna, desperately searching for an age-appropriate answer. ‘They’re used to store water in case I’m stranded in the desert.’

‘Like camel humps?’ said Danny, looking confused.

'Yes,' said Susanna, 'just like camel humps.' The rest of the family laughed.

'But why don't guys have them?' said Danny.

'Because guys aren't important enough,' said Susanna, 'although sometimes I think Calvin has 'em.'

'You keep talking like that, I'll knock your humps off,' said Calvin.

'So does that mean you can store more water than Mom?' said Danny.

'She can't store that much more water!' said Sharon. 'Besides, size isn't everything. And... And I'm old!' The rest of the family laughed. Sometimes Sharon was proud of her daughter's looks, but sometimes she was jealous.

'Relax Sharon,' said Clark, 'I'm old too.' Clark looked at Danny and then looked at Sharon. 'We only got one left.' Clark and Sharon grabbed each other's hands. 'Come here, kid,' said Clark, putting Danny on his lap. Danny stayed there the rest of the dinner, which passed without incident.

Chapter 17

Some weeks later Davy's cast came off and he went over to Susanna's just to show she hadn't killed him. While Susanna sat on the outside couch giggling, Davy did a moon walk on the driveway.

'That's not even... whatever, dude,' said Susanna.

'What do you mean?' said Davy.

'That was non-ostentatious, I can totally moon walk better than that,' she said.

'Then why don't you show me,' said Davy.

'I don't have to prove anything to you,' she said.

'No you don't have to,' he said, sitting down next her, 'but maybe you want to.' Susanna sat looking uncomfortable. 'If you're self-conscious, that's OK.'

'I don't need your pity,' said Susanna. Susanna then got up and stood in the driveway for what seemed a minute and then she started. She spun and tiptoed and shuffled and galloped and did the splits and rose back up like she was levitating and did a bunch of other stuff while singing Billie Jean. I told you Michael Jackson was one of her favorites. And she moon walked.

Now Susanna had never danced in front of anyone except her family and people at church (but that's different) and she felt so shy she could hardly stand it. But as she went through the motions she felt an incredible thrill.

'Jesus,' said Davy, 'you're not bad.' And she wasn't. 'Where did you learn that? Just watching music videos?'

'Yeah, just that,' she said. 'We don't have cable anymore, but I taped a lot of them.' She sat down next to Davy again.

'You know, I thought of something I wanted to talk about,' said Davy, 'but I thought maybe we're comfortable enough with each other that maybe we don't have to talk all the time.' Susanna reached over and touched his hand and they looked at each other. They looked at each other. Davy contemplated kissing her but thought even that would ruin the moment.

And just then a big Studebaker pickup truck from the sixties pulled into the Morgans' drive way. There was a chain tied between the bumper and a hole in the hood, meant to keep it closed. Davy looked on as a guy that looked like two John Candys put together jumped out of the back bed, probably 'cause that was the only place he could fit. And if that wasn't enough, out of the driver's seat came a guy that looked like two Arnold Schwarzeneggers put together. Those two guys were such attention getters that Davy didn't even notice the little fat man in the passenger seat and as they approached Davy felt like he had better grab Susanna and run for the hills, but Susanna had other ideas.

'Lenard! Bubba!' said Susanna, jumping to her feet. And that little girl jumped into the arms of those two guys as they started throwing her back and forth like a football, making her laugh her little ass off. Davy sat there

having a Twilight Zone moment and only broke out of it when the little fat man playfully punched him on the shoulder.

'What's up sport?' The little man then walked over to the two big guys as the Schwarzenegger threw Susanna over his shoulder like he was Conan the Barbarian. The little guy then walked up to Susanna, pinched her cheeks and kissed her. 'How's the little princess?'

'Great, Uncle Cletus,' said Susanna, taking off his baseball hat and kissing him on the head. 'Great that you're here. Davy, this is my Uncle Cletus, and my cousins Lenard and Bubba.' She pointed to the little man, John Candy and Arnold Schwarzenegger, respectively.

Davy couldn't help it, he started chuckling to himself, "Bubba."

Bubba, hearing this, sat down next to Davy with Susanna still on his shoulder, and Lenard sat down on the other side of Davy. With those two cousins on that couch there was barely any room for Davy.

'You think something is funny, boy?' said Bubba.

'I uh,' said Davy.

'Who the hell are you, anyway?' said Lenard.

'I'm like, Susanna's and Leroy's friend,' said Davy.

'Really? Well isn't that sweet,' said Bubba. Davy looked at the two cousins, noticing that Lenard always seemed to have his mouth open and Bubba always seemed to be chewing something, but God only knows what.

'You know what, I think that I have to like, go do something,' said Davy, as he got up to go to his house.

'Yeah, I think you do,' said Lenard.

'Don't trip over that tail between your legs, Davy,' said Susanna.

'Aw, you kids,' said Cletus.

Inside the Morgans' house Clark was watching TV and Sharon was going to the fridge and couldn't help but notice the pickup truck in the driveway.

'Oh no!' said Sharon. 'God damn it!'

'What is it?' said Clark.

'It's your fat, stupid brother!' said Sharon.

'Sharon, you promised you'd try to be nice to him,' said Clark.

'It's just that he always shows up out of nowhere and takes over the house for a week, while he works up the courage to ask you for money,' said Sharon.

'I know he's annoying but he's family,' said Clark, 'and besides maybe we won't notice them as much, now that we have a bigger house.' Clark opened the front door and Lenard was standing there.

'We're gonna need it,' said Sharon.

'Sharon,' said Clark.

Now like Clark, the rest of the Morgans never turned away family. Not only that, but they called on each other for everything, and I mean everything.

One time Cletus's trailer was burglarized, and the first thing he did was to call Clark and tell him to try and head the son of a bitch off on the freeway. He gave him a brief description of what the neighbors said the car looked like. After that Cletus called their cousin Micah in the opposite direction and told him to do the same thing.

Cletus called his family before he even thought to call the cops. The cops really didn't help too much. They just pulled Cletus over for driving up and down the freeway at breakneck speeds looking for the thief and yelling at his relations over the CB that really didn't get that good reception anyway.

Oh yeah, they never caught that creep.

Lenard wiggled his way through the front door. 'Hello Uncle Clark,' he said. 'Hello Aunt Sharon.' He kissed her on the cheek.

'Hello Lenard,' said Sharon.

Bubba wiggled his way through the front door, still with Susanna over his shoulder. 'Hello Uncle Clark,' he said. 'Hello Aunt Sharon.' He kissed her on the cheek.

'Hello Bubba,' said Sharon.

'What's up, college boy!' said Cletus walking through the door. Clark only had a two year degree but most of his relatives thought that was something. Cletus and Clark shook hands and hugged.

Cletus then looked at Sharon and noticed that she was wearing a black blouse, and a jacket and skirt that looked like a multi-colored Mondrian painting.

'Hello Sharon,' he said.

'Hello CLeeetuuuuus,' said Sharon, rolling her eyes.

'My, that sure is a pretty little outfit you're wearing,' said Cletus.

'Oh really,' said Sharon as her mood changed 180 degrees, 'and look I have a hat too.' She grabbed a black beret and put it on.

'Wow look at that,' said Cletus reaching out to grab her.

'DON'T TOUCH ME!' Sharon yelled and that mood of hers changed right back again.

Cletus stepped back, rolling his eyes, and shook his head.

Lenard and Bubba sat Susanna on the island and took turns playfully poking her nose while she giggled.

'You got any would-be boyfriends you want us to skin alive?' asked Lenard.

'Well,' said Susanna, 'I have been working on a list.'

And just then Calvin unknowingly walked into the lion's den.

'Hey look,' said Bubba, 'it's the terminator.'

'Oh no,' said Calvin, coming into the living room.

'Hey, come here pee-wee,' said Lenard. Bubba and Lenard walked over and Bubba put Calvin in a head lock while Lenard rubbed his hair.

'So how many commies are you saying you greased now?' said Bubba. 'Up to fifty yet?'

'Yeah, you updated that shark story yet?' said Lenard.

Now Calvin could be an intimidating man, but between those two Frankenstein monsters he looked like a little child.

'Isn't he pretty?' said Lenard.

'Yeah, even smells like a petunia,' said Bubba.

Now in his room Leroy heard these voices in the living room, and he decided to do the mature thing and jump out the window.

Davy sat in his house watching TV when he heard a knock on his back door. He opened it and it was Leroy.

'Dude, can I like hang out here for a while?' said Leroy. 'I just need to, uh...'

'Get away from your cousins?' said Davy.

'Uh... yeah,' said Leroy. They walked back and sat in front of the TV.

'I don't blame you, man,' said Davy. 'Those are the biggest, scariest, whitest guys I have ever seen.'

'You should try being related to them,' said Leroy.

'No thanks,' said Davy.

'To tell you the truth,' said Leroy, 'they've kinda mellowed out.'

'Why do people like that always have hay in the back of their truck?' said Davy.

'The weight in the back helps the back wheels get traction,' said Leroy, 'plus if you get stuck in the mud you can put the hay under the wheels.'

'I got to tell you, man,' said Davy, 'I've never met I guy named Cletus, and I thought your name was weird, no offense intended.'

'Cletus isn't a weird name,' said Leroy. 'That was the name of one of Alexander the Great's generals.'

'Now that you mention it,' said Davy, 'it does sound kind of Greekish. But I just have to ask, Leroy. Your uncle is a little on the small size and your cousins are a little on the Godzilla size. Do your cousins take after their mother?'

'Um, uh,' said Leroy, 'I try not to think about it.'

That evening Leroy was still hiding at Davy's and as a platter of spaghetti was put on the table only Clark, Cletus, Bubba, Lenard and Susanna were sitting at it. Calvin, Enos, Danny and the dog were sulking on the couch, and Sharon sat on one of the stools at the island thing, puffing on a cigarette and drinking a tall boy. And it was probably better that the rest of the family weren't sitting at the table 'cause there wasn't enough food and not enough space.

'Man, you should see this warehouse I got a job at, Clark,' said Cletus.

'You got a job? That's good,' said Clark.

'No man, this is a good one,' said Cletus, 'I'm making more money now than in a long time, and the flexible hours. This is great.'

'No, that's good man,' said Clark. Bubba grabbed the last of the spaghetti and put it on Susanna's plate.

'There you go, princess,' said Bubba.

'Oh thank you,' said Susanna.

'I'll tell you what, that warehouse is always shipping computers. Probably some of the ones you work on. They got a lot of openings too,' said Cletus. 'I'm gonna try and get my boys work there. These big guys probably wouldn't even need forklifts. Maybe I can get your boys a job there too, if they're ever around those parts.'

'Thanks a lot, Cletus, I mean it,' said Clark.

'I heard that computers can even work out a diet plan,' said Bubba.

'And dating services,' said Lenard.

'This guy would be better if he used 'em for both,' said Bubba slapped Lenard on the belly. Lenard playfully punched him.

'Hey Sharon,' said Cletus, 'would you be a sweetheart and get me another beer?'

'But that's my beer,' said Sharon, after French inhaling.

'Sharon, I'll get you more tonight,' said Clark.

'Are you going to get more dinner, too?' said Enos.

'Hang in there, boys,' said Clark. Clark then started to get up to save his wife the trouble, but he stopped when Susanna got up faster to save them both the trouble.

'I'll get it, Mom,' she smiled.

'Thanks princess,' said Cletus. 'Didn't you use to have more kids, Clark?'

'Leroy could be on one of his walks again,' said Clark.

'You know I did stuff like that when I was his age,' said Cletus. 'I think it was just a way for me to try and feel... free. I don't really have the energy for it anymore.'

After dinner Susanna went to the closet and brought out the shotgun.

'Hey Mom, Dad,' she said, 'Lenard and Bubba want to go shoot up this old car they found. Can I go too?'

'I don't know,' said Sharon. She went and got some safety glasses and put them on Susanna.

'Mom, you're going to make me look like a dork,' said Susanna.

'I'd rather have you look like a dork, than... than... Marsha Dayan,' said Sharon.

'I think you mean Moshe Dayan, Aunt Sharon,' said Bubba.

'Nobody likes a know it all, Bubba,' said Sharon.

'Wait, can I come?' said Enos.

Susanna looked at her cousins and then back at Enos, shaking her head no.

Susanna left with Bubba and Lenard. Later in the evening, Clark and Cletus went and sat on the outside couch. As they talked, Davy and his mother looked on from the Solomons' yard. Leroy was still hiding in case he was caught by the gruesome twosome.

‘That’s his brother?’ asked Davy’s mother.

‘Apparently,’ said Davy.

‘But Clark is so handsome,’ said Davy’s mother, ‘and his brother is so... so...’

‘So so,’ said Davy. ‘They kind of seem like Legolas and Gimli, if they were brothers.’

‘You know,’ said his mother, ‘I think you’re getting nerdier, in a good way.’

‘Mom,’ said Davy, ‘just ‘cause I’m smart doesn’t mean I’m a nerd.’

Now as Clark and Cletus talked, Cletus kept bringing up that warehouse, and Clark saw it as a weird lead in for what he thought was inevitably coming.

‘Look, man,’ said Cletus, ‘I know I borrowed a lot of money from you over the years, that’s why I’m just going to bring this up right away.’

‘It’s OK,’ said Clark, ‘I’ll help any way I can.’ Cletus started laughing.

‘No way, man,’ said Cletus, ‘I’m paying you back. How’s five hundred sound for a start?’

‘Are you kidding?’ asked Clark with his mouth hanging open.

‘No way, man,’ said Cletus, ‘I told you about that job, man.’

‘But still,’ said Clark, ‘this isn’t possible.’

‘I told you It’s a good job,’ said Cletus. He took the money out and gave it to Clark. Clark sat and looked at it for the longest time.

‘Cletus, I can’t take this,’ said Clark.

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Cletus, how do you know this isn’t just one of your impulse buys? Something to make you feel good.’

‘I’m giving away money--how is that supposed to make me feel good? I’m just doing it ‘cause I can, and I think it’s right,’ said Cletus.

‘Cletus, I can’t take this,’ said Clark

Cletus stood up. ‘You know, a lot of people say you’ve changed but I think you’re still the same pretentious bully you always were. Now instead of beating the crap out of me, you do everything you can to keep me in debt!’

‘Cletus, that’s not true. I never expected you to pay me back. I just can’t keep this money when I know you could need it at anytime.’

‘I don’t need it and I never will. I told you I can afford it.’

‘It just doesn’t seem possible.’

Cletus looked into his brother’s eyes and started to realize that he wasn’t conspiring, he was genuinely confused.

‘Look man,’ said Cletus, ‘just take it and sit on it. For years if you have to, just please take it. Look, you know if I want it back, I won’t be shy about asking for it back.’

Clark took the money and put it in his back pocket and looked like he was in a daze. Cletus sat down next to him and they were silent for a while. Then they started talking again about family, old friends, movies and football.

They only stopped when Susanna returned with Bubba and Lenard. She walked over to Clark and Cletus.

'It was so Kool,' said Susanna. 'We shot up this car and a big rat jumped out and I blasted it and it exploded like a water balloon filled with Kool-Aid.'

Cletus stayed for a day or two, and his sons caused a lot of trouble around the house, but he eventually left on very good terms.

Chapter 18

One day Sharon was passed out on the inside couch and Shere Khan was curled up under one of her arms. Her brown eyes were half open even asleep, and even asleep she had a big goofy grin. Under her fancy jacket, a navy blue jacket with every square inch covered with white buttons, she was still known for wearing a Raiders jersey occasionally. And if you know anything about Raiders fans, you probably know something about Sharon Morgan.

When Clark got his new job, Sharon decided she should be a stay at home mom, even though she really didn't do that much. She made Enos's and Danny's lunch when she remembered but she just made peanut butter and jelly every time and they were sloppily thrown together. She hardly cleaned the house; she mostly made the kids do it, mostly Leroy. The same with the laundry and the dishes and almost everything. Cooking dinner was the one thing the family didn't want her to do 'cause she was horrible at it, but it was the one of the few things she kept trying to do.

Not to be harsh, but Sharon Morgan wasn't known for her great achievements. She had never made more than minimum wage her whole life, and if they could have paid her less than that they would have.

She was skinny for a mother of five children, and she wasn't ugly but she never turned any heads, either.

That she didn't drink and smoke when she was pregnant was a miracle, although she probably snuck a few. And when she wasn't pregnant she was eager to make up for lost time.

But despite all of this, Sharon Morgan gave a lot to her family. She gave them laughter and play when they all felt like they could never be happy again. It was hard for those kids not to smile when they talked to their mother. In the burning building which is life's difficulties, you'll find there are only two emergency exits, insanity and comedy. Maybe they ain't so different, but Sharon Morgan chose comedy.

She gave her family a strong female voice, which they needed sometimes. And she gave them love and acceptance on a level they got nowhere else in the world. She gave them things that there were no names for. She was like the Christmas that came without packages, boxes or bags.

With Clark at work and the kids at school Sharon's best friend was Shere Khan. When she slept he curled up next to her, when she sat he sat and looked at her--everywhere she'd go he would follow her, and sometimes he told her where to go.

There was a knock at the door. Sharon didn't react at all. She kept sleeping but Shere Khan got up and walked to the door, and then seemed to remember that he didn't have thumbs. He then walked over to Sharon and started barking. He knew who was on the other side of the door, and he thought it was fine to let them in.

'What the hell!' said Sharon. She looked around, 'Oh OK.' She walked over to the door and found Davy's mother with a basket.

'Oh Amy, you have another kid?' said Sharon. Sharon noticed the tiny hands poking out of the basket, grasping at air.

'No, this is my cousin's,' said Davy's mother. 'I'm really sorry but I've been called in to work and they really need me and I'm sorry, but could you maybe...'

'Watch the kid?' said Sharon. 'I don't know. I'm not really good with babies.'

'But you have five children,' said Davy's mother.

'Yeah, but those are just the five that survived,' said Sharon.

'What?' said Davy's mother.

'I'm joking,' said Sharon, 'but we were scared about Leroy for a while. Look, if you really need a sitter or whatever I'll take him.' She just couldn't think of a good excuse. Sharon took the basket while Davy's mother put a bag full of baby supplies on a table.

'Hey your cousin's baby is Asian, too,' said Sharon.

'It kind of runs in the family,' said Davy's mother.

'Wait, what's its name?' said Sharon.

Davy's mother was about to leave and turned, almost shocked, 'I... uh... Panuwat.' She left before Sharon had a chance to ask the inevitable question on how to pronounce the name. Davy's mother was trying to avoid the situation.

'Panu... Panu?... What?' said Sharon. 'Hmmm, I guess I'll just call you Panny.' She stood over the child. 'Panny?' Panny smiled. 'Is that a guy's name or a girl's name?' She looked at the child until curiosity consumed her. She lifted up the diaper and looked under.

'Definitely a boy's name,' she said. She sat the basket in front of the inside couch and then went back to sleep on the couch. Shere Khan looked at Sharon and then looked at Panny in the basket. He laid down next to the basket.

Shere Khan loved Clark and Sharon and loved everything they loved. When Enos and Danny were babies he guarded them night and day just to avoid the heartbreak he might see in Clark and Sharon. And with Panny in the house, he couldn't help but fall into his old habits.

The three slept until Shere Khan woke Sharon up with his barking.

'What?' she woke up. The dog stopped barking but the baby was still crying. 'Danny?' said Sharon. She looked at the baby and remembered, 'Oh Panny.' She sniffed the air and knew what was wrong.

'Poop this, poop that,' she said, 'that's all God damn kids are good for.'

She changed his diaper and smoked the whole time to try and cover up the smell, which was probably bad 'cause after a French inhale she sneezed a cloud of smoke into Panny's face. Panny just laughed and

somehow survived like all the Morgan children did.

Sharon put the baby down again and went back to sleep on the couch.

Later that day the kids returned from school and all sat on the couch watching TV with their mother and the baby in the basket in front of them.

‘What kind of name is Panny?’ said Danny.

‘You ever think your name sounds weird to him?’ said Susanna.

‘I know mine does,’ said Enos.

Sharon noticed that Susanna wasn’t watching TV at all; she was staring at the baby. Susanna was self-conscious but eventually the instinct hit her that hits all women, she had to pick up almost every baby she saw. She held Panny upright in her lap and started mocking an underbite and talking like Twiki, Bill Cosby, Andy Kaufman, and Yoda. Panny laughed like a drunk old man, and couldn’t help getting the attention of the other children. Eventually Susanna walked over to the window with the baby in her arms, tired from laughing.

Sharon walked over, too, and put her hands on Susanna’s shoulders.

‘You know,’ said Sharon, ‘someday you’re going to make an incredible mother.’

‘Mom, he’s so beautiful,’ said Susanna.

‘Just think,’ said Sharon, ‘your little boyfriend probably looked like this guy, years ago.’

‘Mom, he’s not my boyfriend,’ said Susanna. ‘I’m not sure he’s a good person.’

‘Well, maybe,’ said Sharon, ‘but you got to admit he’s cute. He looks like a young version of that funny guy from the Seven Samurai.’

‘Toshirō Mifune?’ said Susanna.

‘I don’t know,’ said Sharon, ‘I can’t follow subtitles that well. But he also looks like a young version of that sub captain in 1941. Well, whatever his name is, I’m just saying he’s cute.’ Susanna smiled.

They heard a knock on the door. Sharon walked over and opened it. It was Davy.

‘Hey baby,’ said Susanna. ‘I mean... you’re here for the baby?’

‘Duh... uh...’ said Davy. ‘I think so.’ Davy looked at Susanna holding the child and couldn’t help but smile.

‘Here’s your cousin,’ said Susanna. She handed him the baby and Panny started to squirm. ‘Support his bottom and hold him closer. Support his head too. Haven’t you held a baby before?’

‘I... No,’ said Davy.

‘What’s Panny short for?’ said Susanna.

‘Uh what?’ said Davy.

‘His name?’ said Susanna.

‘Oh I don’t know. Pan... What...’ said Davy.

'This is the first time you've seen him,' said Susanna.

Davy almost seemed embarrassed but he wasn't even sure what about, but he smiled and talked a while, mostly with Sharon, and took Panny home.

Chapter 19

Now like a lot of Californian teenagers the Morgan kids liked to go to the beach every once in a while. And when Davy heard about this, he had to go just on the odd chance he could see Susanna in a bathing suit. He hung out with Leroy and Shere Khan at the VW until Calvin and Susanna came out.

Susanna was wearing a Raiders jersey and tattered old blue jeans. Davy could see through the small holes in her jersey the faint outline of a green bikini top. He looked away before anyone could see what he was looking at. Or at least he thought. Susanna looked at him and slightly smiled. Caught you, she thought.

Davy and Leroy sat in the back, with the dog, while Calvin drove and Susanna curled up next to him with her tiny arms around his big arm.

When they got to the beach there was a sparse crowd. The Morgans tried to plan a day that wouldn't be that crowded. They could hear the distant calls of sea lions up the shore. Leroy and Calvin grabbed some blankets and a cooler and Susanna took out a surf board.

'Hey, you surf?' asked Davy.

'What, you don't?' said Susanna. 'Do you do anything?' Davy started to smile. He was getting used to all the insults she dealt out. They staked a place in the sand and Calvin noticed a hot dog vendor.

'Hey Susanna,' Calvin said, 'get us some free hot dogs.'

'No problem boblem,' said Susanna.

'How do you get free hot dogs?' said Davy.

'Every curse comes with its perks,' said Susanna. And with that she took off that jersey and those jeans exposing a lime green bikini. It was modest as bikinis go but on Susanna it might as well have been a Sports Illustrated cover. She left.

'You know, one day Susanna went to the hot dog guy in a bikini, forgetting she didn't have any pockets for money on that thing,' said Calvin, 'and he just gave her the damn things. She forgets how beautiful she is sometimes but if you don't watch yourself I'll make you forget.' Calvin grabbed Davy by the back of the neck.

'Fine, fine dude, I get it, I might as well be the Pope,' said Davy. He was starting to get used to Calvin's threats too. 'Too bad I don't sell hot dogs,' said Davy.

Susanna came walking back with four hotdogs with the works.

They ate the hot dogs, letting Shere Khan lap up the excessive toppings that fell. All but Calvin threw their last bite full to the dog.

'Hey Leroy,' said Calvin, 'I've been working on this trick with Shere Khan.'

'Uh, like what?' said Leroy.

'I've been teaching him this trick, to grab the bikinis off girls,' said Calvin.

'You guys are dorks,' said Davy.

'Oh my God,' said Susanna to Davy, 'you are such a suck up.'

'Well, you got to fake it till you make it,' said Davy.

'How did you get Shere Khan to do that?' asked Leroy.

'I used some of my training,' said Calvin, 'only it was meant to be used to train dolphins to grab mines.'

'Of course you could train a dolphin,' said Susanna, 'you're both water brains.'

'You coming?' said Leroy.

'Maybe later,' said Davy.

'Remember wimp,' said Calvin, 'she tells me everything.'

'No biggie, I'm leaving too,' said Susanna. She grabbed her surf board and ran to the ocean.

'If she surfs, why don't you guys?' said Davy.

'It's exhausting,' said Calvin.

'And scary,' said Leroy.

Leroy and Calvin went off to leave Davy alone sipping on a soda watching Susanna surf in the distance. She zig-zagged and bounced on a wave. She was good till about a minute and she'd lose her balance, landing in the ocean. But she seemed to enjoy it enough that she didn't care that she fell. Davy smiled, and eventually he walked into the ocean and started swimming.

If it wasn't for the half naked girls Davy wouldn't really like the beach (although come on, that's more than enough reason). You see, every time Davy went there he usually just ended up standing around or sitting around bullshitting with whoever was around.

The one thing he did like to do at the beach was swim straight out into the sea till he was exhausted and start to swim back. The first time he did it, it scared the hell out of him and it scared him a little each time he did it. And he only did it once every time he went to the beach, but he still felt he had to do it every time he went.

So he did it this time. Davy started swimming.

When Davy got out to the point that he was near exhausted something cut right in front of him. It scared him half to death 'cause he thought it was a boat at first and it couldn't have been more than inches away. He started treading water and looked around seeing Susanna lying down on her surf board like a Roman noble.

'You could have knocked me out you know!' said Davy.

'I hardly see anyone out this far,' said Susanna, 'you're just lucky that I could steer clear of you in time.'

'Whatever, you just wanted to scare the shit out of me,' said Davy.

'If you really believe that then why do you keep coming back for more?' said Susanna. Davy looked at her wet, slicked back hair and glistening wet marble skin. 'You sure have a lot more endurance than all the others.' Davy started to think that many other boys must have set their sights on Susanna but got fed up with her antics. She was like the Frost-Giant's Daughter, hostile brothers and all.

He swam up and climbed on to her board as she sat up. 'Careful,' she said. Davy leaned in to kiss her but Susanna grabbed one of his legs, throwing him back in the water. 'I told you to be careful,' she said. Davy marveled in his mind. Susanna was stronger than a lot of boys her size. 'Look, get on the other way and behave yourself and I'll give you a ride back.'

'You're out here pretty far too,' said Davy, as they both started paddling.

'Yeah,' said Susanna, 'I like to get out here a ways and just sit sometimes, get away from those perverted ogling guys.'

'Yeah, some of the girls too, maybe,' said Davy, chuckling.

'I guess one of the perverts made his way out here anyway,' said Susanna. They paddled for a while till Susanna spoke again. 'You want to try standing up?' said Susanna.

'OK but I'll probably just fall off,' said Davy.

'Yeah probably,' said Susanna, 'but what you should try and do is try and steer to help you keep balance and balance to help you steer. It's kind of like a bike. Plus, you totally, got to keep your balance when you stand up, put your foot where your center of balance is. Other than that I don't know what to say, you just feel it out.'

'Can this thing hold us both?' said Davy.

'Oh yeah, haven't you heard of tandem surfing?' said Susanna. 'It may not be one of those gigantic fifties boards but it can still carry those three hundred pound Hawaiian guys. OK, get ready! Stand up!'

They both stood up and Susanna threw her little arms around Davy's strong chest and Davy felt her large soft breasts on his back. 'Lean where I lean!' she yelled. Any pleasure Davy had from being held by that pretty girl dissipated as he struggled with all his might not to fall in the water. For what seemed like minutes Davy felt like he was surfing but it was more like seconds, and they fell in the water. The surf board jumped out of the water, free of their weight. They surfaced laughing. Davy swam back to shore and Susanna paddled. They more or less kept pace with each other.

Susanna lay down on a blanket, put sunglasses on and started chewing bubble gum and squirting sun block. She looked around and couldn't see her brothers, which made her nervous at first, then she started to feel more comfortable around Davy. Which was just as well 'cause Davy was feeling more comfortable around Susanna.

'You know,' said Davy sitting on the blanket next to her, opening a drink, 'I was thinking of something. You ever notice how similar Dumbo and 2001: A Space Odyssey are?'

'What do you mean?' said Susanna.

'Remember the pink elephant part? And how it happened right before Dumbo realized that he could fly? The pink elephant segment was a lot like the kaleidoscope part of 2001, and the kaleidoscope happened just before Dave Bowman turned into a super powered space baby.'

'I think you got something there,' said Susanna, almost amazed.

'It's weird,' said Davy, "cause I think... it's almost like that part of Dumbo is a spoof of 2001 but It came out before 2001.'

'I wonder if Arthur C. Clarke or Stanley Kubrick were influenced by that movie,' said Susanna.

'It wouldn't be that weird,' said Davy. 'I heard that a lot of Raiders of the Lost Ark was based on Uncle Scrooge comics,'

They talked until that subject fizzled out.

'Just wondering,' said Davy, 'can you even tan that much? Even for a white girl you're pale.'

'Oh yeah,' said Susanna, half giggling, 'more than most red heads anyway, but it makes me grow more freckles, though.' Davy never noticed before but Susanna had clusters of immensely small freckles where sideburns would be. 'Well wait, do you tan?' asked Susanna, looking embarrassed.

'Yeah man,' said Davy, 'I just get darker. My mom says she used to hate getting a tan, though.'

They both laughed. They started getting dry in the sun, and Susanna started putting lotion on her back and turned over. She looked around and then looked uncomfortable.

'You didn't get your entire back,' said Davy.

'I'll get one of my brothers to do it,' said Susanna.

'Well, how long do you think they're gonna be?' said Davy.

Susanna sat up, looking around, almost panicked. She yelled, 'Calvin! Calvin!'

Davy looked at her and found her current predicament charming.

'Come on, Susanna,' said Davy, 'I'll oil you up real quick and no funny business.'

Susanna looked at him and saw nothing sinister in his eyes.

'Do it really fast,' said Susanna, lying down, 'and don't think I want my top unfastened.'

Davy put the lotion on his hands and laid his hands on Susanna's back. His large rough hands ran up and down the soft silky skin on her tiny back. He could feel her shoulder blades and the line of her backbone. Every time she breathed he could feel her strong muscles flexing. Davy couldn't help himself, he felt like a starving man drooling over a ten course meal.

'OK dude, that's enough, party's over,' said Susanna. She looked up as Davy pulled his hands off her, and her face was filled with terror. 'DAVY!?' Davy looked at her face and followed her vision and realized he had a... well... a... you know... a uh, uh... a pup tent.

Davy did the only thing he could do. He put his hands on his head, his other head, and ran into the ocean to hide his shameful pride and joy.

Susanna took a deep breath and struggled to calm herself.

'Wow... So much for what they say about Asians.' She grabbed her mouth, surprised and ashamed she would say such a thing.

At the end of the trip Calvin and Leroy returned and all four of the kids got in the van.

'So did that trick with the dog work?' said Davy.

'Yes,' said Leroy.

'No,' said Calvin.

'Yes,' said Calvin.

'No,' said Leroy.

'That stupid dog grabbed the shorts off an old lady,' said Calvin.

'Are you serious?' said Susanna.

'What?' said Davy, looking at Leroy. He didn't always trust Calvin's stories.

'It's true,' said Leroy. 'I don't think I'm gonna close my eyes for a long time.'

'Dude,' said Susanna, 'men are such idiots.'

'What did you guys do this whole time?' said Calvin.

'Yeah, why don't you tell them, joystick?' said Susanna.

Leroy and Calvin thought for a while and started laughing. Whatever horror Susanna felt was replaced by her need to humiliate Davy. Davy started feeling embarrassed and started thinking that this girl was running him thin more than any other girl had done in a long time.

Chapter 20

Days later in school, Davy looked over at Susanna in one of the classes they shared and started to draw her portrait without her knowing. He didn't complete it there and then but couldn't help but keep drawing it afterwards, and boy, did it ever look like Susanna. He was so proud of it, he finally showed it to the girl, which was something that he hardly ever did with any girls but he felt he could show Susanna. She took the drawing, saying almost nothing.

But when Davy walked to the dining hall at lunch he saw papers taped to all the walls and tacked to all the bulletin boards. The papers were photocopies of his drawing with a bubble saying,

'DAVY JOYSTICK
SOLOMON
LOVES ME.'

Outside he looked up to the roof of one of the buildings, seeing Susanna. 'He's going to cut off his ear for me!' she yelled at the top of her lungs. All the other kids started to laugh at him. He thought he was finally getting close to Susanna but right now he could only think that she was the biggest bitch he had ever met.

As Davy walked to get his lunch everyone waved as they walked by him. 'Hi joystick,' they'd say one after the other. Davy sat at a table and started to eat. For the longest time he was the handsomest most popular boy in school--well, pretty damn close anyway. But Susanna made Davy comfortable enough to show his dorky side, while simultaneously giving other people the courage to make fun of him. The only person that didn't seem to join in was Leroy, who only smiled as if to say everything is going to be OK. Susanna was turning everything upside down.

The next day Susanna walked over to a cork board and saw one of the photocopies of her portrait. Next to her bubble she saw another drawn in, saying,

'I'm a Bitch.'

Susanna wrote next to it,

'And you better not forget it.'

Davy walked home with Susanna mocking him the whole way. Davy got home and walked to the fridge.

'Mom,' he said, 'are we out of beer?'

'I drank it all,' she said.

'But uh,' replied Davy, 'I've had a hard day. Is there any chance we could get more?'

'David,' she said, 'I really don't like you drinking, and I'm sorry, I just want it to stop.'

'Wha... Wha... Wha... What?' said Davy.

'I let you do it 'cause I thought I couldn't stop you but you have been cutting down a lot,' she said. 'You haven't been getting sick anymore and we haven't had crowds of strangers in our house recently.'

'But Mom, come on?' said Davy.

'I'm sorry David,' she said, 'I don't want to do it anymore. If I'm sure you're not drinking I might buy you some sometime, but just to wean you off.'

Susanna was turning everything upside down.

Davy didn't have it in him to whine and cry to his mom for very long, so as it got dark he left the house and drove to the market district. Davy parked in a parking lot and walked out to the middle of a four lane road where there was a divider covered with grass. There was a man with tattered clothes, long hair and a cardboard sign.

'VIETNAM VET

ANYTHING WILL HELP'

'Gary!' Davy yelled.

'Hey man,' said Gary.

'Dude,' said Davy.

'Man,' said Gary.

'Dude.'

'Man.'

'What's up?' said Davy.

'Davy, business is good, man,' said Gary. He was one of the few people that called Davy Davy other than the Morgans and me. 'Man, like a couple months ago man, like I thought I was in trouble man, like game over man. But man, I've been mopp'n up man, the last weeks or so man. You know what happened a couple days ago man?'

'What man?' said Davy.

'This one guy pulled up man, and man, he gave me a bottle of vodka man,' said Gary. 'That man saved me a trip to the store man, and that same day man, a guy gave me a whole God damn pizza man. Man, I took that pizza and that vodka and I called it a day man. This is as good as when the mayor rounded us up and gave us hotel rooms for a week man.'

'That's awesome dude,' said Davy.

'So what you doing man?' said Gary.

'Dude, is there any chance you'd buy me some beer?' said Davy.

'Man oh man,' said Gary. 'Davy, I would man, but your mom told me not to man.'

'My mom?!' said Davy. He didn't even know his mother knew about Gary.

'Yeah man,' said Gary, 'she was really nice too man, and beautiful man. Oh sorry, I'm not digging on your mom man, just saying man.'

'But I'll like, pay you man,' said Davy.

'Sorry man,' said Gary, 'but your mom was really nice man. Maybe if you caught me those couple months ago man, I might have done it. Maybe a

couple of months ago, man, I would have had to have done it. But man, I don't have to do it now man, and I don't want to make your mom mad man.'

'Are you serious dude?' said Davy.

'I'm sorry man,' said Gary.

Davy knew when he couldn't argue with someone, so he just talked with Gary till he wrapped up the discussion and left.

Davy parked his car outside a Circle K, or something like that. He sat on the hood doing his home work and asking passersby to buy him beer, but he got no takers. He was there two hours and finished his homework and reviewed it. Eventually the clerk of the store came out to smoke a cigarette. The clerk looked at him and Davy felt uncomfortable. Davy got in his car and drove away.

That next Sunday Davy woke up early because he had nothing to put him out for the night. He came out and sat on his car. He heard the door of the Morgans' house open and saw Susanna, or at least what he thought was Susanna, walk out the door. She had a long skirt and a white blouse on and a hairstyle that looked like Princess Leia at the beginning of The Empire Strikes Back. She met Davy's eyes and smiled and they both said nothing.

Davy didn't know why but somehow this weird little outfit put as much larder in his garter as that lime green bikini. Susanna walked over to the VW van and leaned against it. She was almost always the first out the door. The rest of the family followed. All the boys had white shirts and Clark and Calvin wore ties. Sharon came out looking tired and had a hairstyle a lot like Princes Leia at the beginning of Return of the Jedi-- of course, she didn't have the metal bikini; she had an outfit a lot like Susanna's.

Leroy waved hello and so did Clark, but they were late as usual and got in the van and left.

Without Davy's first vice, he started thinking about his other. He thought a lot about Susanna and the situation that just happened and it gave him an idea. If the fastest way to a man's heart was his stomach maybe the fastest way to a woman's was her religion.

That Monday morning Davy talked with Susanna and Leroy as they went to the school bus stop.

'Hey, what kind of church do you guys go to?' asked Davy.

'Why do you want to know?' said Susanna.

'Just curious,' said Davy. 'Is it like all quiet or is it all like James Brown's church in the Blues Brothers?'

'It's kind of both and yet neither,' said Susanna.

'Davy,' said Leroy, 'you should like, come to it. He should come, Susanna.'

'Davy, I don't know if it's for you,' said Susanna, 'and I don't think you're coming for the right reasons.'

'Come on, Susanna,' said Leroy, 'we're supposed to evangelize if we can.'

Susanna sighed, 'OK, OK, OK, fine. You decided to chase the rabbit' it's your own fault if you end up in Wonderland.'

'Yeah, sure,' said Davy.

'Have you ever been to church before?' asked Susanna.

'No,' said Davy, 'but I've watched that pirate religious channel sometimes.'

The next Sunday Davy got up early and put on a shirt and tie.

'God, I can't believe you're doing this,' said his mother watching him, 'but you do look handsome dressed up.' She sighed, 'Are you doing this just for that girl?'

'... I kind of... maybe,' said Davy. 'Is that so wrong?'

'I like these people, and I like most church people. A church brought my cousin to America,' she said, 'but I wonder if you can really fit in with them.'

'What do you mean?' asked Davy.

'Sometimes I wish my parents were here,' said Davy's mother. When she said, here, she didn't mean America. Davy felt weird in a way he never had. His mother had never talked about her parents before; in fact, he half believed she jumped straight out of the mind of the creator. But Davy laughed it off.

'It's fine. How weird can it be?' he said.

Davy got in the VW van with the Morgans. Sharon drove and Susanna sat next to her. The whole time the family talked, as usual, while the radio was turned to a country station, which wasn't weird for the Morgans.

'Eighteen wheels and a dozen roses...'

Davy couldn't place it at first but he noticed a weird thing about their conversations. The bickering was softer and the cursing was down to a minimum and was only said in humor instead of anger. Davy started to feel like he was in a movie edited for TV.

They drove on the freeway until they got to an old rest stop where there was an abandoned restaurant. Davy got out and where a sign might say Denny's, it said First United Los Fronteriza Church. This church the Morgans went to was nothing but an old abandoned converted restaurant. As he stood with the Morgans piling out of the van, he saw lines of cars and some people in the parking lot. Around them were shrubby trees and hills that led into snow-capped mountains. It was a clear day. There was the distinct smell of cows in the distance.

Susanna grabbed Davy's hand and led him just enough to get him walking, then she let go. Inside the church, it was kept up well but not professionally. There was a row of pews, a stage and pulpit and musical instruments in the corner. Around the pews were nicely dressed men and

children, and half the women were dressed in skirts and had elaborate hairstyles like Sharon's and Susanna's. Davy noticed that the only ones that seemed to stand out were a heavily tattooed biker, a woman that looked like an entrepreneur in humanity's oldest profession, and an emaciated, pale teenage girl holding a baby.

The congregation stood around and talked for a while like a casual quiet party. Davy noticed that some people seemed to come up and greet him immediately, enthusiastic that he was there, while others seemed stand-offish, like they were shy. Davy scanned the room and noticed that Susanna was talking to an old man in a suit, tie and suspenders. The people gathered around Susanna and the old man seemed to be listening intently. Some looked uncomfortable but some looked intrigued.

As the top of the hour approached the people lined up in the pews and four girls stood at the front and started to sing soft and low.

"Talk about suffering here below, And let's keep following Jesus..."

They sounded like sirens.

A woman got up in the pulpit and started reading Bible quotes into a microphone.

"The Lord has sent me to do all these things and it is not by my own will that I do them. If these men die by natural means without punishment from God then the Lord did not send me." Every so often someone would yell 'Amen!'

"But if the earth opens up and swallows them so that they go down to the world of the dead still alive then you will know that these men have rejected the Lord."

And Davy thought to himself, Jesus Christ, what the hell else did they put in that book?

The old man Susanna was talking to stood up and spoke. He had a weird accent, like a cross between mid-Atlantic and southern. He didn't use a microphone, probably 'cause he talked so damn loud already.

"Thank you, sister. And thanks to you my brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit is in this place, and you must feel him," he said.

"Today I got out of bed and my legs ached. I opened a jar and my hands ached," he continued. "I turned on the television and my mind was filled with terror and my heart broke. And like every day since my 60th birthday, I knew I was doomed to die." It took him sixty years to figure that out? "Those doctors can hook me up to whatever clever machine they have (and God willing they will)." People laughed. "But it will only delay the inevitable, brought on by coincidence or by the unknown. It may be delayed by ten years or a hundred years, or hell, maybe a thousand, the way things are going. God bless them if they can do it, but it will only be a delay." He started to power walk back and forth on the stage.

"Someday these machines our souls have been poured into will no longer plague our souls with these pangs. As wonderful as these bodies are,

they will fail us. But someday... someday we will have bodies that are free. It has to happen; if God has an inch of sympathy. We will be luminous beings.

'But I and many men have searched for the power to do this within humanity and it has never manifested. Robespierre tried to do it, Hitler tried to do it, Jim Jones tried to do it, but they all failed, because they trusted in the abilities of man to control other men. There is no way in hell that I'm ever going to sprout wings and fly to heaven; even with the wings, I wouldn't know where to fly to.' On every other period or comma he stomped on the floor.

'If there was something in you that could give you this power you would have used it by now, you would have used it.

'There is nothing in me that can give me this power, nothing that can give me this freedom. Something has to come from somewhere out there and give this to me. You have to say, I AM YOURS, TAKE ME!

'What's giving it to you?' he pointed at Leroy.

'I uh ... uh... ' said Leroy.

'Jesus, stupid,' said Enos.

'That's right! Jesus, Stupid!' said Pastor Madison. He pointed to other people in the congregation.

'What's giving it to you?'

'Jesus, stupid.'

'What's giving it to you?'

'Jesus, stupid.'

'What's giving it to you?'

'Jesus, stupid,' they all said.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" "It's Jesus, stupid."

Random people in the crowd yelled 'Amen,' and 'Thank God.'

'Turn and embrace your bothers and your sisters, love them as Christ loves you,' said the Pastor and they did. Davy was grabbed by random pretty girls and ugly old men and hugged. Every one of them called him brother. As that fizzled out some people sat back down but some still stood, knowing they'd have to get back up soon enough. 'Is this one of those quiet, solemn churches?' said Pastor Madison.

'Lord no!' said someone.

'Is it?' said Pastor Madison.

'Lord no!'

'Is it?'

'Lord no!'

'Is it?'

'Jesus, stupid,' said Leroy. Everyone laughed.

'All of you stand up now, please,' said the Pastor, 'and tell him right now, I am yours, take me!'

The congregation stood up and random people started yelling. 'I AM YOURS, TAKE ME!'

'I AM YOURS, TAKE ME!'

Soon three men grabbed the instruments from the corner and formed what looked and sounded like a Rockabilly band. A man stood in front of them and started singing with the beat into the microphone.

'Prayer bells of Heaven, oh how sweetly they ring...'

The whole congregation swayed with the beat clapping and a handful got in the aisles and danced. Davy couldn't help but start laughing, but it seemed to fit in with whatever was going on in the rest of the church.

Eventually that song was over but before half a second was over a new one started and who showed up to lead the congregation? None other than Susanna.

'Three men on the mountain,
Up on Calvary,
And the Man in the middle was Jesus;
He died for you and me...'

There were some in that church that didn't really like the Morgans. They thought that except for the Wilkins, the Morgans were the most sinful family in that church. They thought Susanna asked too many questions, and that Sharon drank too many beers. And yes, some in that church were jealous of Susanna. But most saw Susanna as the hero of their religion for the same reasons others were jealous. She knew the Bible inside and out and believed it, plus she sang as good as Tina Turner.

Davy looked as a thirty something year old man stepped between the pews and the stage. He danced crazier than anyone and then started to shake like Scooby Doo. Pastor Madison put his hands on the man's head and he fell into the pastors arms. Davy looked on and couldn't help but think he was in another Twilight Zone episode.

After the service Davy had polite conversations with the people that were there, until he could look for Susanna. He saw her standing on the edge of an irrigation ditch looking at a cow and her calf on the other side of a barbed wire fence.

He walked over next to her and even though the ditch was artificial and so was the cow if you think about it, the babbling water made them still feel closer to nature somehow.

'You're a real good singer,' said Davy.

'I saw your face, Davy,' said Susanna. 'I can imagine what you're thinking. Be honest or don't say anything at all.'

'Look, I respect what your family wants to believe,' said Davy, 'and I respect religion to a point, but that one guy...'

'What's wrong with that?' said Susanna.

'You're a lot smarter than that,' said Davy.

'Why do I have to agree with you 'cause I'm smart? Some people look at the world and say it's all dead, I look at the world and say it's all alive,' said Susanna. 'I do believe it, Davy. I know 'cause it happened to me.'

'You just thought you did. I don't believe in miracles,' said Davy. 'I don't believe in magic.'

'Why don't you believe in magic?' said Susanna.

'Because it's just science that we don't understand,' said Davy.

'Well answer this--how much of the universe do you think humanity scientifically understands?' said Susanna.

'Like, less than one percent,' said Davy.

'Then that's a universe that's at least 99 percent magic,' said Susanna. Davy felt like he walked into that one.

'OK, fine, you're really clever,' said Davy, 'but even if science is a small part of our universe, it's still better than magic or religion.'

'They don't contradict each other,' said Susanna. 'Edward Hitchcock was the founding father of paleontology and invented the theory of evolution, even before Darwin, and Hitchcock was a Christian. James Maxwell invented the electromagnetic theory, making the electric generator possible, and he was a Christian. Gregor Mendel was the founding father of genetics, and he was a Christian. Georges Lemaitre invented the, big bang theory, and he was a Christian. Alfred Wegener invented the, continental drift theory, and he was a Christian.'

'You know everything they did, but I bet you don't know who did it. They all helped create the modern world and no one knows who they are.'

Susanna was right, Davy knew about all the things those men did, but if he ever knew who they were, he forgot about them a long time ago.

'Look, that's a good point,' said Davy, 'but that doesn't mean that God comes down and helps people. Or does whatever happened in there.'

'It can only happen if God cares about us,' said Susanna. To Davy this didn't seem like the first question that should be asked.

'I don't know if there's a God,' said Davy, 'and there can't be a way that you're so certain.'

'There is,' said Susanna.

'Is it that fourth dimensional thing?' asked Davy. 'Because just 'cause there might be fourth dimensional creatures out there doesn't mean that one came down here and was worshiped like a god.'

'That's not what it is at all, Davy,' said Susanna.

'Really?' said Davy.

'Yes,' said Susanna. Davy looked at her and saw that she was serious.

'What is it?' said Davy.

'I don't know that you'd understand,' said Susanna. Davy looked at her and knew that he had to approach her with pure, honest curiosity.

'Just try it, please,' said Davy. Davy half expected her to say she saw Bigfoot once, and he told her the secrets of life, but what she said was one of the weirdest things he had ever heard.

'Existence is infinite. We know this because of infinite causality chains. Everything has to come from something. That's science; it's what a lot of--maybe all--human progress has been based on.

'The only scientific way of knowing something is alive is if it's super complex. Life is just super complexity; it's the only thing that's universal and exclusive to all life known and what we expect to find. So if Existence is infinitely complex, that also means it's alive.

'Existence is alive, it knows everything, it can see everything, it created everything, it can do anything. It is for all intents and purposes the Theist God, and it is.'

'What?' said Davy.

...

Now maybe Susanna's argument convinces you and maybe it doesn't. And maybe you understand it and maybe it went over your head. But what you have to understand is it helped convince Susanna, and using that she had never lost an argument. And you also have to understand that some of Susanna's argument came from St Thomas Aquinas and some of it came from Baruch Spinoza but a lot of it was invented by Susanna Morgan herself.

When Susanna first thought up her idea she was suffering from insomnia trying to go to sleep in that closet in the Morgan's old small trailer in Oilville. She knew that aggressive thinking like this stopped her from going to sleep but sometimes she just couldn't help it. She thought about things like this all the time, and she could slow these thoughts down but she couldn't stop them. She thought about things like this when she was walking to school, when she was in school, when she was on the toilet and sometimes even when she was asleep. But these thoughts were too strong to allow for a change of consciousness.

She thought about it so long that eventually several concepts came on to the stage in her mind that had never been on stage together before. And together those thoughts opened a curtain and allowed an idea to walk on stage--an idea that she had never had before, an idea that maybe no one had ever had before. As that idea came out on stage, and Susanna looked at it head to toe, she started to have a strange feeling. She swore to God that she could feel something physically moving inside her head.

Susanna swore to God she felt something physically moving inside her head, inside her brain. Was she feeling the neurons in her brain rearranging? Was that even possible? She suddenly couldn't think of anything else. She panted and breathed like she was terrified, but what emotion she was feeling she couldn't think of a name for. She got up in an attempt to force her mind to think about something else, but it was all she could do to open the closet door. She walked up and down the hallway, stumbling like she was drunk. It was all she could do just to think to walk, but

she kept pacing up and down the hallway as if it might stop her from going mad.

Soon Clark sensed the movement in his house and came to find Susanna, who all but ignored him as she paced back and forth. Clark grabbed her by the shoulders and made her look him in the eyes.

'Susanna, what's wrong?' Clark asked. He put his lips to her forehead checking for a fever. He looked her in the eye. 'Susanna? Baby girl?'

'I... don't know, Dad,' said Susanna.

'Are you sick?' said Clark.

'I think I am,' said Susanna. She wanted to tell him what had happened but somehow she couldn't. She was scared to death that if she gave words to her thoughts that they would somehow dissipate. Her current state scared her but the loss of her idea scared her more. It's like her idea was a monster that she saw in the woods and to speak of it out loud would unleash a curse. This was the first time she had ever lied or hidden something from her father and so far it was the only time. But she couldn't unleash that curse or let that idea dissipate.

Clark took Susanna and had her sleep with him and Sharon on the living room floor. Clark tried to sleep but he kept waking up to check on his daughter. Susanna couldn't fall asleep but she kept her eyes closed so she wouldn't frighten her father.

When Susanna went to school she was worthless; she might as well have not gone.

That night when her parents got home from work and she was still in the same state, and they started to debate on what was going on.

'I think she has a slight fever,' said Clark, 'but this is like no kind of fever I've seen.'

'Honey, are you sick?' asked Sharon.

'I think maybe,' said Susanna.

'Susanna, have you been drinking?' said Sharon.

'No Mom,' said Susanna. 'God.'

'Or worse?' said Sharon.

'NO!' said Susanna.

'Wait a minute, I know what's going on,' said Sharon. 'Oh my God, you're having your first period.'

'Mom, I had that a year ago,' said Susanna, 'don't you remember?'

'You're having a period,' said Sharon.

'Mom, I'm not having a period,' said Susanna.

'Oh my God, you're pregnant,' said Sharon.

'MOM!' said Susanna.

'Sweetheart,' said Clark, 'there's something wrong with you and I don't know what it is but... but we need to know. If you aren't better by tomorrow I'm taking you to the emergency room.'

'Clark, are you sure?' said Sharon.

'It's worth it,' said Clark.

'Dad, I'll be OK,' said Susanna. 'Really, I can't explain it but I'll be fine. I'm just having a cold or something.'

'Do you understand how important this is?' said Clark. 'If you're sick we need to know.'

'Dad, I'll be fine,' said Susanna. She wasn't so sure about that, but she knew there was no one who could help her even if there was something wrong, so she chose not to panic her parents in case there was nothing wrong. Besides, she couldn't tell anyone about what was happening anyway.

Susanna operated as if most of her brain was busy and there was only a small amount allowed for actual day to day thought. But she muddled through somehow for about a week, many people thinking she was sick, or drunk, or high. Susanna felt frustrated in some respects, angry that this hadn't passed, but soon she realized even though she couldn't tell anyone her idea, she could write it down. When she did just that the affliction seemed to lift, and day after day she started to return to herself. But even though nothing was taken away, something was added. She was more of a person than she was before.

Susanna believed in God at least in part because of the idea she just had, but she also felt this idea didn't come from her. She felt it came from somewhere else, something outside of her or a part of herself she never knew existed before.

Often Susanna said to herself, 'If this was more gravy than grave.' But she thought, like she didn't have a choice to love her friends and family, she didn't have a choice in this either.

For days the family thought she was sick, but after a week or so her situation would lift periodically and then eventually it lifted for good. Susanna was relieved but also sad, like something left her but at least she still had the knowledge that she wrote down. Often she would have fantasies of herself dying and friends and family finding her neatly written idea and either understanding it or casting it aside. She scoured the library and could find nothing like it. She told her family and her preacher and some of her teachers but not much came of it.

Davy thought about Susanna's argument and what hit him most was he realized he never even thought about what life really was. He started to look at rocks and find he couldn't really tell the difference between him and that rock other than just plain complexity. He thought about what Susanna said. "Some people look at the world and say it's all dead, I look at the world and say it's all alive."

The next day at school Davy met up with Susanna and asked her to talk with him during lunch.

'I got some questions about what you said,' said Davy.

'Like what?' said Susanna.

'I want to talk alone,' said Davy. 'What do you... How did you get up on the roof? Is that where you go during lunch?'

Susanna smiled. 'I'll show you.'

Davy met up with Susanna during lunch and they went to the theater house that was in the same building as some of the classrooms.

Susanna led Davy behind the stage and pulled away a curtain, showing a door, and opened it. Inside the room were piles of old theater props, togas, Renaissance puffy shirts, cowboy hats and some taxidermied animals.

'Look,' said Susanna, 'a grizzly bear, a jaguar and a peccary. Those things are extinct in California now. Those things are really old, some of the stuffing is falling out, and I even saw a rat jump out of the bear. I wonder if they're Californian. This is the oldest building in the school. I think it goes back to the Depression, when my people came to California.'

'Susanna, we're not supposed to be here,' said Davy.

'Dude,' said Susanna, 'all the bad things you've done and you're afraid to get caught in an old room? What are you more afraid of? That there aren't any teachers here or any other kids breaking the rules with us? You keep thinking you're a rebel. But the establishment is wrong, the rebels are wrong, everyone is wrong. They're all part of the same stupid machine.'

Susanna opened a door that showed a small room with stairs leading down into the ground and a ladder leading up a small shaft.

'Is there a basement too?' asked Davy.

'No,' said Susanna, 'not exactly. There's an underground passageway to the office building across the court yard and a door that opens to what I think is a bomb shelter.'

'A what?' said Davy. Susanna started climbing the ladder and Davy started following her.

'That's right man,' said Susanna, 'it's totally non-obtrusive. You know, there are a bunch of bomb shelters, millions at least, all over the country, left over from the fifties and sixties. I found this place, actually, when I was in the office building. I thought it was a basement at first but I was surprised to find out that it popped up into another building.'

'How did you even think to look for this?' asked Davy.

'How did Columbus find the Americas stupid?' said Susanna. 'He went where other people didn't go.'

They got to the top and Susanna opened a trap door, and the two teenagers climbed up on to the roof of one of the school buildings. Davy looked around and could get a good look of Los Fronteriza. Susanna sat down on the closed trap door.

'So what questions did you have?' said Susanna.

'I uh,' said Davy. He had to think of them again. 'Just to be clear, you said the universe is probably limited and existence is infinite.'

'Yeah there're things beyond what we now call the universe, maybe even other universes,' said Susanna. 'At least that's the modern definition.'

'What you said about life,' said Davy, 'are you sure that's all it is?'

'Do you really need anything else?' said Susanna.

'What about reproduction?' said Davy.

'No thanks,' said Susanna, she giggled till Davy's frown made her answer. 'What about fire, it reproduces? Besides, isn't reproduction just a short sighted description of change and growth, a lot of things do that already?'

'Well uh... But what about... uh uh uh,' said Davy, 'organics?'

'What do you mean by that?' said Susanna. 'Organic as in carbon based? Alien life and sentient robots can easily be based on carbon or silicon or stuff we don't know about. Other than that, the word "organic" is really just a shorthand, or a fancy word, for alive. You can't just define a word with its near synonym. Life is extreme complexity, period. It's the only thing universal and exclusive to all life that we know of or expect to find.'

'OK. Is it conscious? Is this "god" conscious? Even if it's alive, is it conscious?' said Davy.

'Well, what is consciousness?' said Susanna.

'Free will?' said Davy.

'It depends on what you mean by that. Sometimes I think consciousness is just a higher level of life, a higher complexity,' said Susanna, 'and a will free of what? Its parents? Its teachers? The cops? Or whatever?'

'Instinct,' said Davy.

'It depends. Some might say conscious thought free of instinct might just be further complexity,' said Susanna. 'Instead of natural selection choosing a successful form, we make an artificial model of the universe in our mind and use that to test forms, forms of our behavior. If free will is free of anything we know of,' said Susanna, 'then it is magic. You said it yourself, magic is science we don't understand. Other than that I don't know if there's free will. Sometimes I don't think it matters, but sometimes I think it might be an even bigger and harder question than if God exists. That free will is so hard to understand makes it almost the purest form of magic we know. There's a reason that it's called mind-body dualism instead of just dualism. Sometimes I wonder if that's what Einstein thought when he said he believed in God but he wasn't sure if God had a choice in making us.'

'If you're talking about if free will is necessary for life? I'm not sure.'

'I think one of the only ways to test free will is through history. Most European Christian countries didn't believe in free will in the Middle Ages and they never made any progress. Soviet Russian doesn't believe in free will and most of their people live in poverty beyond belief'

'Most Americans believe talent in mathematics is a matter of genetics or luck, but most Japanese people believe mathematical talent is a matter of practice and the will to work at it. And the Japanese are better at math than Americans.'

'People and societies that believe in free will seem to succeed more than those that don't; that, in and of itself, may prove that free will is real. Just that, in and of itself, makes me like free will to a point, 'cause success makes the world in general better. And I think God made a world that makes sense: the spiritual and the objective work together.

'I used to think dualism was completely wrong, because I really think the line between magic and science is an arbitrary one based on how much humans understand our world. But now I wonder sometimes. To have free will, you might need at least some kind of dualism to a point, maybe, I think, maybe.

'If there is free will I think it's very rare so we have to make the most of it. And if life is mostly random things with good things surfacing, like natural selection, then we need to hold on to those good things with all our might, 'cause they might not come again.

'Most societies that don't believe in free will fail.

'But anyway,' continued Susanna, 'the benefits of believing in free will aside, I don't think it's a reliable standard for whether something is alive. I'm not even completely sure I have free will, so how can I tell if you do? I just assume you do 'cause you're alive. But I know you're alive 'cause you're just as complex as I am.'

'What about time?' said Davy. 'Can God exist before time?'

'You don't get it,' said Susanna. 'God exists outside of time and is time. Time is just one kind of medium; there're others out there outside our universe, whether we understand them or not. And those mediums carry causalities and that just advances my argument.

'You can't go back before time and expect to find a bunch of nothing. Even what people call nothing is something. Nothing can come from nothing, not real nothing.

'Plus we know there has to be existence outside our universe 'cause our universe is so complicated that either it was created by an intelligence or it was created by an infinite existence with random events that eventually worked out. But I think that infinity just advances my argument. So I win either way.'

'OK look,' said Davy, 'what about change? You said the principle that everything comes from something is what maybe all of human progress is based on--what human science is based on. But there's another principle. Everything changes, maybe even the principle that everything comes from something.'

'But you're supposed to keep uniformitarianism in mind. It's better to assume things are the same outside your experience as inside your experience, unless there is proof otherwise,' said Susanna. 'But besides that, if you think that something can come from nothing, then you have to think that existence has limits. That's a position that's been proven wrong from Galileo to Columbus to the first caveman that thought maybe the world didn't end over the next mountain range. The only way you can get any scientific

human progress is to assume that there is an answer for everything, that there is a reason for everything, that in that big nothing out there is a something. To say something of no consequence can have consequences is like saying someone committed a just murder. If it's just, than why are you calling it a murder? Nothing is just a place holder till we find a real answer. It's pro-life and pro-human and pro-progress and pro-science.

'Atheist talk about a God of the margins, but modern atheist are making a nothing of the margins. They just call it nothing 'cause no one understands it. Their philosophy only works outside the margins, my philosophy works on both sides.

'The thing I don't get about atheists is that they say that existence can't be proof of life or intelligence 'cause it's just a bunch of natural processes, whether we understand them or not. But they say we're just a bunch of natural processes, too. I'm sure that we are, more or less. Natural or whatever, everything is made out of something. But I am alive, and I'm alive and intelligent, if something else is even more complicated than me, then it has to be alive too.'

Davy thought about what she said and he wasn't sure if he agreed with it, but he couldn't think of a good argument against it. He could only think to ask questions.

'Haven't you told other people about this?' said Davy.

'I told my parents but they didn't understand it,' said Susanna. 'I told my Pastor about it but he told me that... that I was smarter than him in some ways and he wouldn't know a lot of the answers to the questions I had. I have to admit I was disappointed, but I admired him for saying he had limits. I never got that from a teacher; they all think they're gods.' She sighed.

'I told one teacher about it once,' said Susanna. 'He didn't like it. He said once that computers and robots would someday become alive. I thought that he might go along with my idea since he had broad concepts on what life was. I told him my idea and pressed him, comparing my idea to the robots he talked about, and he recanted. He would rather abandon his idea than admit mine might be right. Sometimes education doesn't make people smarter; it makes them more certain, more prejudiced.

'I told others at my church and the ones that did understand it said that it was blasphemy. They said it was too close to pantheism, but Moses Mendelssohn said that there was no contradiction between theism and pantheism. I don't think there is either, mostly.

'There are some things I don't like about pantheism. I read that the one supposed difference between a theist and a pantheist is a pantheist thought that God couldn't be personal, that depends on what you mean. As far as God having emotions, or answering prayers, I think God can do what he wants. The only question is, is that what he wants?

'That leads into that pantheists don't believe God can be personified. But even Ezekiel said that Jacob didn't really wrestle with God but instead with an angel. But I think that's really a moot argument. I don't even think

people are really personified. It's not like we can see a person and understand what they are, their thoughts and their soul.

'I also think it's wrong that a lot of pantheists think that God doesn't judge people. If you think God doesn't make judgments, just ask the dinosaurs.'

They both laughed. Like I said before, Davy found it hard to argue with Susanna, and whatever the point, he had never heard a strong and intelligent religious voice before, and it intrigued him.

'Is that why you're a Christian? Is that why you believe in God?' said Davy. 'How could people even know there's a God if your theory wasn't known yet?'

'I know, but I don't. It's not that the arguments by Aquinas, Spinoza, Lucretius, and Descartes weren't convincing to a point, but I think I like mine better. And mine just built on what they did. I'm just a product of my time.'

'Maybe. I think that maybe we can recognize it even if we don't understand it,' said Susanna. 'We're made to recognize life somehow. Ancient people looked at nature and said, "Hey look, that looks alive." Also, there's morality.'

'What do you mean?' said Davy.

'I was talking to Pastor Madison one time and he asked me, "If Hitler succeeded in defending Germany, taking over Europe and brought it into the modern world in a good way, would all the horrible things he did be justified?" I said, "Maybe if he succeeded" and he said, "Something in us tells us that's not right."

'That's when I thought that there's a lot of morality that doesn't make sense,' said Susanna. 'It doesn't make sense in any practical way, but we're still compelled to do it. Most people think that faith made religion and then religion made morality. But I think maybe faith made morality and then morality made religion.'

'One time a guy asked me if I'd be moral if I was an atheist. I don't know if I'd be moral if I was an atheist, but if I was moral I wouldn't really understand why. It would be something I was compelled to do, for some unknown reason. Like faith.'

'I still wonder if it's a big leap to go from what you're saying,' said Davy, 'to a religion.'

'Most modern religions only make sense if you think God cares about us,' said Susanna. 'Some people believe in God but don't think he cares about us, like Mark Twain. Sometimes I think that God doesn't care about us. But in the great scheme of things, things do seem to be getting better. What do you think?' Susanna turned to Davy. Davy was surprised. Susanna had gone from a lecture to begging a question. 'I mean, if you judge the big picture from caveman days to now. We live longer, have democracy, have less racism, even less war, kinda. Everyone has the bomb and so far nothing happened, thank God--that's a miracle if there ever was one. We especially have less

poverty compared to the 30s or the 70s or the 1870s. I think things are getting better, maybe, not personally all the time, but overall.'

'I'm not sure sometimes,' said Davy, 'but most of the time I think that technology is good as long as we keep it away from bad people.'

'Some people argue that that means that we should trust in science only and never religion,' Susanna said. 'But I think it just means that God is reasonable and made a reasonable world that we can understand and use. And make things. At least to a point.'

'Computers are incredible. I love computers,' she continued. 'When personal computers first came out people weren't even sure what they could be used for, but somehow, some people knew, psychically almost, that computers were important. Computers might be even more important than automobiles or books. Computers might make so many things possible and everything better. Computers might be the greatest thing ever created by mankind. In the future they might divide history into two categories, before and after computers.'

'I even love how they changed music. Some people think New Wave wouldn't have happened without computers. It's like how the piano changed music in the late 1700s and the electric guitar helped make Rock and Roll.'

'But there are still a lot of bad things in the world,' said Davy.

'It goes back to the question of evil,' said Susanna, 'I'm sure there's a God but the only question I still have is, does God really care about us? I think that maybe some systems on earth are so efficient that he doesn't want to break them with constant inconsistencies. Like evolution--look at the incredible things it created. Maybe God doesn't want to corrupt it. Even though a lot of people end up dying.'

'But even that might change in the future. People should be rewarded for their success, but not be persecuted for their failures. They can learn from their mistakes and try again. An evolution based on the mind, not DNA.'

'And have you ever thought about an alternative to this existence? If God stopped us every time we did something wrong, would we even feel like we had any freedom at all? And if he saved us from every outside threat, would we ever make any progress at all?'

'But maybe, hopefully, in some ways it doesn't matter, at least in some ways. Maybe we're all just in Plato's cave and all the pain we experience is just an illusion.'

'Sometimes I wonder if people burned alive during the Holocaust got to heaven and God told them, "This was just a test, if this had been an actual life, the death you just experienced would be followed by news or instructions."''

Davy laughed but Susanna continued when he was done. 'Sometimes I don't think it means a test as in that we're tested, but that an idea is tested. I mean maybe this world is meant to test ideas.'

Davy spoke up, 'It just seems that so much of religion is on the way out and atheism is coming in.'

'Maybe, sometimes I just think people are bored with things like Christianity. It could be no more complicated than that,' said Susanna.

'I don't know how anyone could be bored at your church,' said Davy.

'Sometimes I think that Atheism is the breakout religion of the 20th century, like Christianity was in the 3rd. But I hate how they talk like atheism is going to solve all the world's problems like war. They like to overlook that between Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, Kim Il-sung, and Mao Zedong, and all the other communist true believers that just happen to be atheist, atheism has killed more people in the 20th century than any other religion, and Napoleon tried his damndest in the 19th. And it's no coincidence, every communist dictator that ever lived, or at least was of any significance, was always an atheist. It's a trend.

'Too many atheist think they have the right to control, to persecute, and to kill, like the communist. People like the communists think we're nothing; they think we have no value and no rights. No rights to our property, our money, our lives, or our children.

'No one talks about the systematic way the Soviets tried to turn children away from their parents and away from their religion, and their heritage and their birthright.

'Even when it comes to science atheists aren't always on the right side, despite what they say. The most vocal critics of theories like continental drift, and the big bang were atheist. That the scientists that created those theories that they persecuted were Christians, I think it isn't a coincidence. But when the sonar and the high powered telescope were created, proving those theories beyond a shadow of a doubt, atheists just decided not to talk about their opposition to those theories.

'I definitely don't think all atheists are bad, though. I think some of the people my dad works with are atheists and I think they're heroes. And Darwin was definitely very atheist-ish and he was a genius. But I'd still like to argue with them, though.

'The point is, atheism isn't the magic bullet to prosperity people say it is. It doesn't even seem like a magic bullet to mediocrity. The communists thought that to stop all the trappings of religion that they should create an atheist theocracy. But the real way to avoid the trappings of religion is to set it free. People should be free to believe and live the way they want, and be free of threats and violence and laws, and talk about it freely.

'No religion should ever use force on another, whether they want to call themselves a religion or not. Freedom is the only way we're going to make any progress on things like this. The first amendment has probably brought us closer to God more than anything since the Bible. We can't get anywhere with societies like the communists have.

'Sometimes I'm afraid that atheism is part of a bigger trend where people are starting to just discount parts of religion, and even worse,

morality, just 'cause it doesn't make sense to us. Don't get me wrong, I love logic, but logically you have to admit that there's a lot about this existence that we have to live in that we don't understand. Even Mr. Spock said sometimes it's logical to act illogical. Dogs can't understand calculus and we're basically a similar creature only more complicated. We're both finite, so there have to be things we don't understand. What they are we don't know, we don't understand them. "It is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain."

'We have finite minds, if not by capacity then at least by our own mortality. And now that those are being filled to their capacity (to the point that no one scientist can understand all human knowledge and a new branch of science seems to be created every other year) we're starting to think that we know all that there is. But that's just an illusion; it's like thinking there isn't any food left in the world just 'cause you're full. There's still an infinite existence out there.

"That's the problem with people like the communists. They only follow morality they at least think they understand. But things you don't understand can still ruin your life, or end it, or even make it better. If people are free, they'll figure it out on their own. We'll see what works and what doesn't in the real world. See it in ways our minds, as great as they are, could never imagine.

'But that's why when you're faced with things you don't logically understand it's more important than ever, to never lie. "Don't take the Lord's name in vain"--lying about God, and/or lying about his will, is one of the worst sins you can ever commit. And it gets even worse when you use violence to hide that lie.

'People thinking they have the right, for whatever reason, to use violence against peaceful people is the source of war, not religion.'

Susanna looked away for awhile and then turned back.

'Anyway, I'm not sure a lot of atheists really are atheists,' said Susanna. 'Look at Picasso. You said yourself that if he was right, that we could have the powers of a Jedi. And his African paintings, it's like ... I think he was more like Martin Luther than anyone. But instead of going back to the beginning of the Catholic Church, he wanted to go back to the Stone Age. The only problem was that Africans weren't really Stone Age, even though they seem primitive to us. No one is really part of the Stone Age anymore; that life is gone. But my point is that I don't think that Picasso was really an atheist even though he said he was. I think he was kind of a Pre-Raphaelite as far as religion goes. He hated contemporary religion, not the belief in God.

'And then there's Arthur C. Clarke,' said Susanna. 'When I first saw that movie I didn't think it was aliens that left the monoliths, I thought it was God. Someone told me later it was aliens. But I just can't believe that ET could do all those things. I read once that Clarke said, "It was a force of infinite power and perfect wisdom." The guy says he's an atheist, but he wrote a story about God.

‘Sometimes I wonder if a lot of atheists really believe in God but they just grew up hating their parents and their preacher and the teachers they had in school, because they knew they were surrounded by idiots.

‘Sometimes I understand the appeal of atheism: it’s more comforting to think that there is no God than to think there’s a God that doesn’t really care about you. But comforting thoughts aren’t always right. Sometimes I think Mark Twain must have been one of the most depressed persons on earth.

‘Sometimes I think that some people just can’t stand to have anything to do with the horrible past that we have, that we have to start over again. But we’ve lost so much already, so much history and so much tradition. I can’t stand to let any more of it die, if I can help it.’

Susanna stood up and walked to the edge of the roof.

‘Existence is infinite. We know this because of infinite causality chains. Everything has to come from something. The only scientific way of knowing something is alive is if it’s super complex. Existence is alive. It knows everything, it can see everything, it created everything, it can do anything. It is for all intents and purposes the Theist God, and it is.

‘John Steinbeck called it the big soul, George Lucas called it the Force. I don’t think they felt they could just use the name God. Words can be important to people. Even people in the Bible didn’t like giving God a name, as if naming something diminished it somehow. Even Yahweh just means “I am.”

‘But it’s alive and it’s conscious and it’s out there and it’s right here, and it sees us and thinks about us. It knows things about us that we don’t even know. It’s God.’

‘Jesus,’ said Davy.

‘It’s interesting you say that,’ said Susanna. ‘With a name like Solomon you might be related to Jesus.’

‘What?’ said Davy.

Davy couldn’t say much after that. He climbed down with Susanna and they attended the rest of school and went home.

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Chapter 21

Davy had never thought about his family or his ancestry till now. But the thought that he could be related to a man worshiped by billions of people around the world, including the girl he was obsessed with, put a mania in him.

One day he went to the library and started reading all he could on the history of Israel and the Jews. And finally after dancing around it for so long he grabbed a copy of the Tanakh and checked it out. He read it in days, narrowly doing his schoolwork and going to work. He even read it while he was flipping burgers, even though Jesus Coria made fun of him for it. Davy couldn't help it.

'So Jews aren't supposed to eat pigs, lobsters or bats,' said Davy reading. 'Bats?' The only people he could think that would even eat that were Leroy's and Susanna's family.

Davy thought that the first part was better than anything Tolkien wrote and the latter was better than anything Robert E Howard wrote. Plus, what drove him on was the idea that maybe he was reading something that was a part of his ancestry.

One thing that got his attention was the king that he was named after, and maybe even descended from. King David was a great man but flawed even by his own morality, which seemed bizarre by modern standards—a morality that was strangely liberating and practical, compared to the after-school special morality that Davy was used to, that was pushed by whoever for whatever reason. The point was King David, like a lot of the heroes of the Tanakh, wasn't really a hero; he was an antihero. King David reminded him of Conan or Aragorn, and Samuel reminded him of Merlin.

Davy started to think that all the fantasy and sword and sorcery books and comics he read were just a roundabout way for him to try and search for his heritage. Even the satanic lyrics of a lot of the heavy metal bands he listened to, he started to think were just a way for him to try and connect with some kind of magic. But now he was starting to think he stumbled on to some real magic, magic that was a real part of his life and family. He went to bed that night feeling like that magic was inside his veins and faces were looking down at him from the stars.

At first he was hesitant to learn about his father's heritage, 'cause after all, his father left him. But in the end he didn't resent his father's heritage, he only resented his father for not sharing it with him.

After looking at his father's side of the family, one day Davy started to look up facts on his mother's side. He read anything he could find on Thailand or Siam. What he found ironic was that even though he had hardly thought about religion till now, he came from one of the most religious countries on earth.

He found that his people originated in what's now southern China. And a hundred years or so before Leaf Ericson landed in America, the Thais migrated to Thailand and were led by the hero Simhanavati in wars with the native Wa people. They fought scores of battles with each other and their neighboring Burma. Just before the founding of Jamestown, King Naresuan and his brother the White prince rode into battle on hordes of war elephants. Around the same time George Washington was fighting the revolution, King Taksin, determined to reach enlightenment, went into the wilderness and was never heard from again and his successor King Rama I funded Bangkok as the new capital. Around the same time Susanna's people were escaping the Dust Bowl, Thailand started to make its first steps toward democracy.

He also found that Thailand was one of the few Asian countries that was never taken over by European colonialists or by the communists. One thing he thought was weird was that Thais usually wouldn't eat elephants or cows.

'That's Kool,' said Davy, 'so if I go all the way with this I'm not supposed to eat bats or elephants or beef or pork. I guess I'm a squirrel man.'

Now there wasn't quite as much about Thailand at the library as there was about the Jews so Davy started to go through weird means. One day he went to a video rental place and checked out *The King and I*. He was embarrassed but he wanted all he could get. He watched it late at night. As he watched, he started to think that even though King Mongkut probably didn't sing and dance, maybe some of the other traits he had in the movie were true. Maybe he was a well read, brilliant man, maybe he cared deeply for his people, maybe he loved his family and his son, maybe he was great father.

Like it was destiny, Davy found, oddly enough, that Yul Brynner also starred as King Solomon in another movie. He played a king of both his peoples.

One day Davy went into a Chinese market in the old downtown. It had VHS's and Betamax's from all over Asia, not just China but South Korea, Laos, Japan, Taiwan... you get the point. He noticed that some were Thai movies. One was even a taping of martial arts matches titled, "Chinese kung fu masters vs. Thai Boxers."

Davy took two movies home, and the martial arts taping was the first he watched. And as he watched, he was amazed. After every Bruce Lee movie he had ever seen, he thought that kung fu was the greatest fighting style ever invented. But when he watched that video he saw kung fu master after kung fu master get turned into grease spots by every Thai Boxer that walked into that ring.

Davy started to realize that he was descended from some of the strongest, toughest, fastest warriors that had ever walked the face of the earth. He watched as a Thai Boxer put his opponent down with the swing of his elbow. The man had long hair like Davy and even kind of looked like him.

Davy felt like a tree reaching into the ground with its roots, growing stronger and thicker pumping magic into his body.

Later he forced his mother to watch the other Thai movie with him. There was no dubbing and the subtitles were in Chinese and Malaysian and something else that took up half the screen, so his mother did the best she could to translate the basic plot as she could understand it. It reminded him of Schwarzenegger's Conan, but with Uzis.

One day when Davy decided to buy his own copy of the Tanakh he decided to buy a copy of the Dhammapada. He found that the Dhammapada wasn't the history book the Tanakh was; it was more like a list of moral laws and life lessons. It wasn't so much that Davy never heard before to treat his fellow man with respect and kindness, but for some reason to hear it come from this ancient voice made him believe it even more. At his job and his school people started to remark on how Davy somehow seemed more polite, more helpful, and more gentle, and eager to put a smile on other people's faces, and he had one on his.

One day Davy decided to go to a Buddhist temple. The one he went to wasn't as fancy as a lot of the tourist attractions that you could find around California; maybe that was why he went there. It was just a man's house. A short old man with glasses that took total strangers in sometimes to sit in his living room and look at a statue of Siddhartha Gautama. Davy looked at the man made of clay with a slight smile and one of his feet on top of his shins. On either side of him were two small wooden elephants.

In the corner was another man with a shaved head and dressed all in orange. The man in orange read from a trapper keeper and chanted.

'What language is that?' asked Davy of the man with glasses.

'Indian,' said the man with glasses.

Davy looked at the statue and turned to the old man.

'How do you pray?' asked Davy.

The man had Davy sit down on the floor and he sat down next to him.

'You just talk to him, with your hands together,' he said. 'Ask him for help, either for yourself or for your friends or relatives, living or dead, because it's one continuum. But the second part isn't a ritual. It's not just something you should just do here, but in all your life. Revere him, revere what he wrote, what he said, revere his life, and work hard to understand him and practice his teachings in your life.'

One day Davy's mother was surprised when Davy caught her coming home from work.

'Mom?' asked Davy.

'What is it, David?' she asked.

'What was your father's name? His real name?' said Davy.

'Why do you ask?' she said.

'I was just wondering, thinking,' said Davy, 'I don't have a middle name. I was wondering if maybe I could have his, if it's OK.'

The more Davy learned about his ancestors the more he learned to love his name, but he realized it only had one half of his heritage, and he wanted something from the other half.

Davy's mother smiled. 'Kachawuth,' she said, 'my father's name was Kachawuth.'

Some years in the future Davy had it legally added. But from that day on as far as he was concerned his name was David Kachawuth Solomon.

That night the mother and son watched TV together and she grabbed one of his strong arms and laid her head on his shoulder. Davy's mother was hesitant at first at embracing Davy's new mania, as she didn't want Davy to seem too un-American, 'cause she had had problems with that herself. But eventually she started to understand that it was impossible for Davy to be un-American. Davy couldn't be more American if he was Abraham Lincoln's son. But the more Davy read about his ancestors, she felt the more that his ancestors were lining up behind him like the back of a knife and he was the edge. Without them he could never make a cut, he'd just be a tiny thin shard of metal lying useless on the floor. Davy was becoming a better American. He felt he had to make the most of the incredible life his ancestors fought so hard to create throughout all the ages of man.

Over the weeks that followed, Davy learned that Susanna went through a similar odyssey. As far as her parents knew, her mother was Scotch-Irish in descent and her father was Welsh. About the time Susanna hit puberty, she started to spend entire days at the library, looking up anything she could on the history of the Celts.

She read about the Egyptian princess Scotta, who led the Milesians to the British Isles, and the great battles they fought with the native Tuatha de Danann. She read about the Irish hero Cú Chulainn and the Scottish warrior woman Aífe. She read about the race of heroes and gods worshiped by her ancestors, the children of Don and the children of Llyr. She read about King Lludd, the Welsh hero Owain Mab Urien, the Celtic rebel Boudicca, the Roman commander Magnus Maximus, and of course, King Arthur himself.

She read about how they farmed wheat, herded cattle and lived in fenced-in villages with circular houses made of branches and mud. They wore brightly colored togas and pants. In battle they covered themselves with blue war paint and spiked their hair like ancient Punk Rockers. When they captured enemies they would sacrifice them, and the enemies they killed, they would harvest the heads and display them in their village. They worshiped on holidays at Stonehenge for reasons and in ways still not understood.

When they converted to Christianity they were one of the last Christian strongholds to save the religion in the wake of the dying Roman Empire and the onslaught of the pagan Saxons.

Susanna even went to see *The Black Cauldron* when it came out in movie theaters. She thought it was a stupid movie, but it was based on Welsh mythology so she watched it anyway, and even took notes.

There was a time when Susanna was young and stupid that she thought she hated the English and the Romans for what they did to her people. But she soon knew that there was more than enough hate in the world without her dredging up old ones. It was OK to use history to dredge up old love but not hate 'cause there's never enough love in the world.

And yes, there was love to be found in history. Susanna loved the Welsh, the Irish and the Scots. She loved the Egyptians for the loan of their leader. She even loved the Romans for the culture and religion they introduced. She even loved the English because after all, David Bowie and Robert Smith were English, or maybe just British, whatever. Plus she learned that you didn't have to go too far back before your people started to live in another place, wear different kinds of clothes, eat different foods, speak different languages, have strange names, and maybe even have a different religion than you do now. That made her think that maybe all the different people in the world couldn't be all that different than her ancestors and not so different than her. Yes, there was a lot of love to be found in history, you just needed to know where to look.

The next couple of weeks, Susanna and Davy met at school to trade stories about their ancestors. They didn't just wait to talk, as they did on a lot of other subjects that they talked about with other people, they actually listened, and they couldn't wait to hear what the other would say.

Chapter 22

One day Clark Morgan was driving home from work in his Nissan Sentra. He drove without incident until he eventually looked in his rear view mirror and noticed a cop car was right behind him. He changed lanes and so did the cop car. He took a turn and so did the cop car. He merged with traffic and so did the cop car.

'What the hell?' said Clark. 'I probably went a notch to fast back there on that 90 degree hill. Now he wants to follow me and see whatever bullshit fines he can rack up.'

Clark drove like a robot programmed with a driver's ed manual, with that cop car following every twist and turn behind him. When he got to his own block, Clark got the idea to drive around it a couple of laps to see if that idiot would follow, and wouldn't you know it, that cop car followed him every lap. When Clark got to his house the third time, he pulled in the drive way. Clark got out of his car and his handsome face turned to stone as he eyeballed the two Johnny laws sitting in front of that car. The one in the driver's seat gave him a sneer as they drove off.

'That's right, you sons of bitches, I'm on to your game,' said Clark. 'You aren't getting any of my hard-earned money so that idiot mayor can flush it down the toilet.'

Clark walked into his house, finding his wife and daughter starting to cook dinner and his sons watching TV. Leroy was reading a book for school and Enos was reading a book not for school. He grabbed his wife and kissed her.

'Hey Dad,' said Susanna, lifting the lid off the skillet and putting it back, 'I was running a shift last night at Queen Cali's, and we had a Muslim girl, a Jewish girl, and a guy that was a Seventh Day Adventist. I was joking around and said, "I think I'm the only person here that can eat bacon." And you know what? They were all surprised. None of them had any idea that the other couldn't eat pig.'

'Moses strikes again,' said Clark.

'Sometimes I wonder if people know how close they really are,' said Sharon.

The Morgans sat down at the dinner table.

'Hey Dad,' said Enos, 'how many transistors does a normal computer have?'

'Well, there was a recent one that had about 130,000,' said Clark, 'But you got to remember that just two years ago it was half that, and in another two or three years it'll probably be twice that. Moore's law.'

'What is a transistor?' said Leroy.

'A switch,' said Clark, 'An on-off switch.' Enos had already asked his father this question many times but he was glad Leroy asked for him, he listened intently 'cause he couldn't get enough of it.

'That's it?' said Leroy.

'That's it,' said Clark, 'only it's just a whole bunch of them.'

'Yeah,' said Enos, jumping back in, 'a transistor has an input and an output, and another wire that controls if it's on or off.'

'The switch is silicon, a semiconductor,' said Clark. 'When you add extra electricity it allows the input to jump across to the output. The thing is, there're no moving parts to it, which is the main reason you can make them so small and put so many in one machine.'

'And when you get two switches together you can make a gate. "Or gates" can have either transistor switched on for the output to work. And "and gates," you need both transistors switched on.'

'Then you can make a "half adder" using an "and gate" and using an "X or gate." The "X or gate" is made out of an "or gate," and an "and gate," and a "nand gate." "Nand gates" only turn off when both sources are on.'

'Once you have two "half adders," you can put them together and make a "full adder." One "half adder," takes signals in and the other puts signals out. Then you can hook up a bunch of "full adders" end to end, so one can control the other.'

'From there you can switch on any "Full adder," or combination of adders to do whatever command you want. Providing you have enough transistors.'

'It's all based on conditional actions. It's like that video game you're always playing.'

'You play it too, Dad,' said Danny.

'Well,' said Clark, 'when the little guy is on the ground he walks back and forth, when he gets on the ladder he goes up and down.'

'But Dad, you said you mostly use math at work,' said Leroy.

'Boolean Algebra mostly,' said Clark. 'You see, since everything in a computer comes down to on-off switches, you can translate it into mathematics using binary numbers, which is the kind of numbers Boolean Algebra deals with.'

Clark grabbed some junk mail and started writing on the back of it. 'Every number has to have one and/or zero. 0, 1, 10, 11, 100, 101, 111...' Clark went on till it seemed ridiculous.

'OK,' Clark continued, 'here's some simple addition problems so you get the gist of it: if $A+B=X$, then $0+0=0$, $0+1=1$, $1+1=1$. You see the rules, right?'

'Any number of 1's will make a 1?' said Enos. Susanna smiled.

'Yeah, it's just that easy,' said Clark, 'and all the normal math laws apply for multiplication too, like $0(1) = 0$. From there you can have a solution and just solve for variables in the problem till you get one that works, like

normal algebra. And you got to remember that with this kind of math, multiplication is an “and gate,” and addition is an “or gate.”

“Cause zero times anything is zero,” said Enos.

“That’s right. Here’s something a little harder. You kids remember factoring, right?” Clark continued, ‘ $(A+B)(A+C)$, $(AA)+(AC)+(BA)+(BC)$...’ Clark wrote a bunch of other problems. ‘Now try factoring those.’

The Morgans left the dinner table and started to watch TV, except for Susanna and Enos, who were still sitting at the table figuring out those math problems.

‘Dad, like you totally won’t believe this,’ said Leroy, breaking from the boob tube. ‘A couple of days ago at work, I swear to God, we had a midget in some kind of techni-colored muumuu come in, along with a guy in an orange toga, a lady with a big red dot on her head, a guy in a cowboy hat and boots, a guy in a kilt, and a guy with a giant three foot tall Mohawk.’

‘You know, I believe it,’ said Clark opening a beer.

Clark thought back to one of his breaks that day. He walked into the rec room, drinking a can of soda pop. Clark didn’t like coffee. He preferred beer, but at work he just drank pop. He leaned up against a shelf next to some of his coworkers: A midget in some kind of techni-colored muumuu, along with a guy in an orange toga, a lady with a big red dot on her head, a guy in a cowboy hat and boots, a guy in a kilt, and a guy with a giant three foot tall Mohawk.

‘Well how have your guy’s day been?’ asked Clark.

The guy with a Mohawk snorted and spit into a waste paper basket. ‘Pretty God damn good, man,’ he said.

One day before Clark got his new job, he took Calvin to a job fair to try and get him enthused about education. He saw an ad for it on the TV. He remembered stopping at a stand pushing jobs in computers. Clark expected them to pitch to Calvin, but he was amazed that they pitched to him too.

‘I’m too old to go to college,’ said Clark.

‘You don’t have to go full time,’ said the woman at the stand. ‘You can go to night school and you only need a two year degree for some jobs. I can only assure you of the job security that you can have.’

For some reason Clark felt the sincerity in the woman’s voice and he decided to give it a try, an old college try. Clark was a college dropout--well, more like a flunk out--but the new college he went to was way different from any he had ever seen or heard of. It was a modest building with modest teachers. It was math mostly, which worried Clark at first ‘cause he had a teacher in high school that said ‘higher math was a waste of time,’ but Clark soon learned that that idiot didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. The classes weren’t easy, a lot of people even dropped out, but Clark soon got through them well enough. He found the more he succeeded, the more he was

driven. And as soon as he graduated, he found finding a job was as easy as falling off a logarithm.

But as easy as getting that job was, the day Clark was hired he walked out of that building smiling and laughing and then all of a sudden he started crying. He was so happy he started crying. Like many a day, he had something to celebrate, he walked into the first bar he found, but when the bar tender poured him a glass, he couldn't drink it, not right away. Clark took an hour to start drinking that beer 'cause he knew the happiness he had, then and there, was better than anything that was in that glass, but like I said he started drinking eventually anyway.

Now when most people asked Clark what kind of work he did they didn't believe him when he answered, which was sad, 'cause if more people did believe him, this world would be a better place. The whole day Clark sat in a cubicle and did math problems. Some of them he put in the computer 'cause they were too complicated to do by hand, and some of them he just did by hand 'cause they were too complicated to do in the computer. Some of them he did in a minute and some of them took him all day.

Clark did so many math problems that some of them, even the most complicated ones you could think of, he started to guess the answer before he even solved them. But Clark wasn't good at everything; in fact, the first year or so was like another year of school. Sometimes he stayed up all night reading books as Sharon curled up beside him.

What Clark soon understood was that a computer, its programs, and every little action made by that program were like the average Bible, labeled with chapters and verses--a hyper text. And the only way for that computer to find those actions was to give it a road map, point A to point B. And the easiest way to do that was to write a math problem.

Even the way to physically make computers at the factory was directed by math problems. The things were too complicated, for the most part, to be made by hand, so they needed to be made by robots. And those robots moved so subtly that no human could perceive it and definitely couldn't direct it, not without math to tell it where to go. Math was the way we were going to make hidden worlds manageable, even if we couldn't see them.

But that being said, he understood little about why he needed to do any individual math problem, and he had little idea of what happened to them when he was done. What he thought was funny was the guy who gave them to him hardly understood what Clark did, and the same for the guy who took them. In fact, the boss preferred it that way 'cause it cut down on industrial espionage and it made the workers focus more on their immediate work. Plus the boss noticed that if he just gave his employees their beginning and their goal with no instructions, they started to find new ways of doing their jobs that no one manager could have thought of--a ground up strategy instead of a top down.

Clark was amazed that even the super geniuses upstairs that understood his job inside and out didn't completely understand each other's jobs. Now when I say the geniuses up stairs, that's not really literal, they mostly worked in the basement for some reason.

Clark heard two of them complaining about the boss one time. 'Did you hear what he said to me the other day? He was all like, "Don't you get it, this machine is going to be bought by millions of people. If we make it eight seconds faster that's like eight seconds every day times a million. That's like 70 lives. We're saving lives," he said.'

'That's crazy,' said the other genius. 'He pushes us too hard; he's like Darth Vader or something, I'm just glad he can't choke us with his mind.'

'He calls himself a hippie, 'cause he smokes pot and has long hair,' said the first genius, 'but how many hippies have that much money and work an average of 70 hours a week?'

'Yeah,' the other genius, 'he's a hippie in every way, except the ways that matter.'

The geniuses were mostly young guys that just graduated with four year degrees in either math or engineering. The only old ones were guys that worked in engineering their whole lives.

Sometimes they wouldn't work for a whole week, but a lot of times they would work around 60 to a hundred hours a week, and on their salary, they were really racking it in.

But if you think Clark was jealous of the geniuses, you're wrong. Clark knew as much as that company needed him, it needed the geniuses just to survive, and if they didn't do their job, Clark would be back doing the same old bullshit jobs he always had.

Clark often wondered if the boss even understood everything. He thought maybe his boss was more like Kermit the Frog: he tied the whole thing together, he made sure the transition between the Swedish Chef and Gonzo the Great went smoothly.

As Clark got older he got to the point where he started to think that he didn't have to understand everything, he just started to judge things on results. When Clark went to the store he saw those computers and floppy disks flying off the shelves without any unjust persuasion and his checks kept coming in, and that was good enough for him.

And maybe it wasn't bad that no one understood everything. A beehive might seem simple to us, but to a bee, with a tiny bee brain, it probably wasn't so simple. Drones, worker bees, and even the queens probably didn't understand what the others did, and they probably didn't understand that they pollinated the flowers they all depended on. And they probably didn't understand that farmers planted the source of their nectar and that the farmers needed the bees. They all just had to have faith in each other.

Clark thought that humanity was at a stage where one king couldn't just sit on his throne and dictate to everyone what they were supposed to do. We got to a point where we needed to work with each other in one giant mind. One little mind in one little man's head just couldn't cut it anymore. And in a way, it was an odd kind of democracy.

'No one man can make a computer,' admitted one supervisor. 'It takes thousands of different disciplines that all take a life time to learn; you just have to judge things on the results.'

Clark met the boss a couple times. Like Clark he wore a white shirt and tie. But his face reminded Clark of a picture of Jesus that his parents used to keep on the wall. His skin was like glowing honey, and his eyes, beard and hair were a soft brown. He had no unprovoked emotion and no wasted thoughts. He never really exercised or took vitamins or dieted, but still looked like a movie star. He seemed like Adam before the fall of man but instead of being a noble savage he was more like a noble Buck Rogers. Sometimes he seemed like a businessman, sometimes he seemed like a scientist, but sometimes he seemed like a holy man that just marched out of the desert. He was a man that fit perfectly in his niche in the world and as a result, they treated each other well.

Even his failures he made into successes. This was his fourth company; all the others had fallen by the wayside. But he saved all his experience, all his contacts and even his original chair, and used them to make the next company better.

Clark's boss didn't grow up poor. He grew up middle class, the same life that Clark was trying to give his kids. About the time Clark was fighting that war, it was said that Clark's boss, when he was fifteen, started his first business in his parents' basement. And just before he moved out, he paid off their mortgage. He was smart enough to get in one of the best colleges in the world, but he eventually got bored and decided to go to work instead. He thought it better to get into the industry while it was young. Now Clark's boss was almost swimming in money, and just like Clark wasn't sure how to act middle class, his boss didn't know how to act rich. He drove the wrong kind of car, he had the wrong kind of house, he liked the wrong kind of art, he liked the wrong sports teams, the wrong education, the wrong clothes, he had the wrong wife, the wrong parents, and his dog was wrong and stupid, too. But somehow all those wrongs added up to make a right, at least as far as Clark Morgan was concerned.

One day Clark's boss shook his hand. 'How you doing? Everything going OK?' Now he was talking about work, but Clark took it as a question about life in general.

'Pretty God damn good, man,' Clark said. His boss smiled and just laughed.

'Good, good to hear it,' he said. Maybe he did know what Clark meant.

For most of his life Clark felt like he was Bob Cratchit working for Scrooge but for once he had a boss he was grateful for.

Now the company that Clark worked for wasn't that big; in fact, it didn't really make anything on its own, it just did extra work that the bigger companies didn't want to do, and a lot of times they didn't understand what the bigger company was using it for, but they were glad for the work.

And believe it or not, most of the people that worked at Clark's company were rejects and washouts from the bigger companies, but his company found a use for them. And sometimes Clark wondered if it was even possible for him to get fired. Clark dressed in business clothes, showed up nine to five and even cleaned the bathroom sometimes, but he knew that judging from the other workers he really didn't need to. There was one guy that showed up to work in a bathrobe and bunny slippers, one guy that looked like one of the bad guys from *The Road Warrior*, and one guy that only worked at night. Clark was working in an industry that had grown so fast and so unexpectedly that very few people had prepared to educate themselves to work in it, and however unconventional the workers were, the company was glad to have them.

In fact, companies like Clark's scoured the country and even the earth to find people to work there. He met a man from Missouri, where his grandparents grew up; he met a man from Wales, where his ancestors were from. And Clark met people from places that he only heard about in stories or only read about in the Bible, and a lot of the people he met were from places that he never even heard of. If there were people on Mars, there was probably one working at Clark's company.

Clark even worked with a guy from Vietnam, and as far as Clark knew they were shooting at each other not so long ago. But when the man had problems with his work, Clark helped him, and when Clark had problems with his work the man helped him.

Clark's company looked like a meeting of the United Nations, but they got along a hell of a lot better. It was like all of humanity woke up one day and said, come on guys we got work to do.

Clark looked around at his company sometimes and wondered if he was watching a new world being born.

Clark often talked to a man on his breaks that tried to be a professional physicist but washed out. But the education he got in math was more than enough to get him a job making computers. He told Clark once, "The mistake most people make is that they think correlation always correlates with causality."

Clark responded, "Absolutely, but correlation is still a lot better than flipping a coin and hoping for the best, and sometimes it's all we have or all we can understand."

"Yes," responded the would-be physicist, "I guess that is true. Yes."

One day the would-be physicist said, 'The one thing I hated about being a scientist was dealing with the press. They want to make everything into an absolute. Most people that aren't scientist don't understand how wrong that is. Life isn't like that; there are very few absolutes.'

'Yeah, that's probably true,' said Clark. 'Yes.'

Clark described his job to someone once and he told Clark, 'success has its price.'

Clark told him, 'you should try being poor.'

A lot of people told Clark that his job sounded boring, but Clark liked being bored for once. Clark grew to love his nice boring job, his nice boring car, and his nice boring house where he kept his nice boring family.

Clark sat on his couch, happily bored out of his mind. After all, adventure is just what the idiots call adversity, and Clark had enough of that.

'I forgot to ask, how was your day, honey?' said Sharon.

'It was OK,' said Clark. 'In fact, it was pretty God damn good.' His kids laughed at him.

Enos brought the solved math problems to his father to have him check them, but the lights started to flicker on and off. They all looked over to see Susanna playing with the light switch.

'Boolean Algebra was invented in the 19th century to explain how the human mind works,' said Susanna, 'Now, after all that time, we know it's a lot of these.'

'I told a teacher at school that,' said Enos, 'and he said that sounded like something Frankenstein would say.'

'I always liked that movie Young Frankenstein,' said Susanna. 'I always wondered what would have happened if Igor hadn't made a mistake. What if they put the right brain in?'

She looked at the power switch and smiled, and her family laughed.

Chapter 23

In Los Fronteriza there was an old bar called Dan Webster's. When Disco was popular a new owner put a dance floor in. When Disco died they started playing New Wave, Electro Funk and Rockabilly. They made so much money that they eventually put an extra floor on top of the building. On that floor they didn't serve any alcohol; they didn't even allow it. The second floor was meant for the underaged, 'cause they got the idea to get them young. Diabolical sons of bitches, aren't they?

After showing off some of their dance moves to each other, Susanna and Davy got the idea of going to Dan Webster's.

One night Susanna, Davy, Leroy and Sheena piled into the front seat of Davy's El Camino and drove off. Leroy wore his best t-shirt and jeans (the ones that had little to no holes in them); Davy wore a shirt and tie.

Susanna wore a purple denim jacket, black denim pants, a black t-shirt, purple leg warmers, and a black hair scarf. Sheena wore gigantic boots, a Tasmanian Devil t-shirt that was cut to show off her shoulder--it was untucked but she wore a belt over it--and her hair was braided on the sides of her head making the free hair on top look a lot like a Mohawk.

'Dance clubs are stupid,' said Sheena. There's always one isn't there. 'It's just crappy music and crappy people acting like...'

'Crap,' said Susanna, chewing on gum.

'I was going to say idiots, but that's just as good,' said Sheena.

'Don't be such a snob,' said Susanna. 'I love New Wave. You should like New Wave; it's related to Punk Rock.'

'Punk sellouts,' said Sheena, 'New Wave bands are all just sellouts.'

'Well, look at it this way,' said Susanna, 'you'll be the most enlightened person in the room.' Susanna sighed, 'Besides, music is always changing so much. You ever see those dorks that still listen to Disco? It's pathetic. That's why I want to listen to music while it's still popular. 'Cause if we don't listen to it now, we'll just look like dorks listening to it later.'

'Punk Rock is never going to be unpopular,' said Sheena, 'you just have to know who to hang with.'

'I like Zydeco,' said Leroy.

'Leroy, I told you not to talk about Zydeco in public,' said Sheena, 'but I have to admit I like it better than New Wave.'

'I used to just like Heavy Metal,' said Davy, 'but now I'm starting to like everything. Besides, it's hard to dance to most Heavy Metal.'

'I bet you could line dance to Heavy Metal,' said Leroy. The other kids only groaned.

'You know Kurtis Blow can be fun to dance to,' said Susanna.

'My brother loves that guy. It's actually kind of annoying sometimes,' said Sheena.

'Rap's weird, though,' said Davy. 'I wonder if it will ever get as big as New Wave.'

‘The new New Wave, bands aren’t even real Punk,’ said Sheena. ‘They’re just pop bands they call Punk so people think they’re rebelling when they go to those stupid dance clubs.’

‘Yeah, but all music is like that,’ said Susanna. ‘They all have a system of control or a stigma to break through. The real breakthroughs are all over the place, man. Sometimes they get through a hole in the Punk fence and sometimes a hole in the New Wave fence, or the Heavy Metal fence, or even the Zydeco fence. That’s what I look for, breakthroughs.’

When they got to Dan Webster’s they found the stairs to the second floor were right next to the front door. A bouncer was there to make sure they paid to get in and make sure those God damn kids walked up those stairs and stayed there.

Upstairs there was a small bar serving virgin drinks and a row of tables against the wall that went around the whole big room. The room was only lit with lasers and flashing lights, and the floor was sparsely covered with kids that could dance and ones that thought they could. The four teenagers sat down at a table, sipping on weirdly flavored pop and talking very little, ‘cause the music was too loud to hear anything.

‘How does it feel? To treat me like you do...’

Leroy and Sheena where almost definitely not going to dance ‘cause Leroy was too shy and Sheena was too stubborn. Susanna and Davy sipped the drinks like they were trying to get liquid courage, even though they knew there was nothing in those things. They looked at each other again and again until they both had a “what the hell” look on their face at the same time.

They walked hand in hand to the edge of the crowd, and they started but then stopped. They looked and got courage from each other and started again. They were robotic at first but then became smooth. They side stepped and bopped and twisted and banged their shoulders together, all timed to the beat and each other. Davy snapped his fingers while Susanna shuffled around him.

The whole time as they danced, they improvised. They had nothing planned but somehow they knew what the other was going to do. They were like a holy trinity: the boy, the girl and the hard beating, fast but steady song. Their feet stomped to the beat, their fingers snapped to the beat and their teeth clinched and released to the beat. And maybe even their hearts beat with the beat.

‘Boom, Boom, Boom, let’s go back to my room...’

Don’t you like it when songs have subtle, cryptic lyrics? Susanna often wondered why she liked the songs she did. She was sure that some of them she actually liked ‘cause she could recognize true intelligent artistic

innovation. But some she was sure she liked 'cause it reminded her of a time in her life, or a person, or a place, and this was one of those songs, and as far as Susanna and Davy were concerned this was their song. And they both thought it was a stupid song, among the stupidest they ever heard, and maybe kind of disgusting, but they both loved it 'cause it reminded them of each other, and those kids sure could dance to it.

They galloped and did the splits and found they were far away from each other when they stood back up. So Davy threw an invisible lasso around her and Susanna moon walked back to him, and he spun and dipped her.

Davy had one hand around Susanna's waist and Susanna had one hand on his chest; their other hands they held together, fingers locked.

Silhouetted by the lasers and flashing lights, they leaned toward each other and kissed. They kissed for the very first time. They stood back from each other, holding each other's hands. Davy looked into Susanna's pale blue-grey eyes. Susanna looked into Davy's rich brown-orange eyes. Davy's hair flared like the mane of a lion, and Susanna's hair rose like the hood of a cobra. The world around them faded to gray, and every sight and sound around them slowed to a halt till it disappeared. The girl and boy floated in a limbo where only two people existed, only two things existed. And they lived there for what seemed days, but in a flash the world was back and was more vibrant, more vivid, more colorful and more profound than it had ever been in their lives. Susanna threw her arms around Davy's neck and he around her waist, and they kissed again.

The two started laughing like they were drunk off their asses; in fact, they started to act like the apostles when they first felt the Holy Spirit. The two then grabbed each other by the hand and started running around the dance hall. Susanna then started jumping onto the tables and leaping from one to the other, and Davy chased her. They leaped around the room, knocking over drinks and stepping on other kids' hands, they ran across the bar making the bartender yell and shake his hand.

A bouncer grabbed the two kids and started to pull them to the door with them still laughing. Now the Mayor of Los Fronteriza threatened to close down Dan Webster's 'cause kids were thought to get drunk there, among other things. And seeing Susanna and Davy carry on like they did, that bouncer thought it better to throw them out.

Leroy jumped to his feet and Sheena followed him. As the bouncer threw Davy and Susanna into the street, Leroy and Sheena ran past him.

'Leroy, wait up,' said Sheena.

'I can't just leave her alone,' said Leroy.

Susanna and Davy's mood didn't change once they were outside. The two started running down the street, laughing and yelling. Leroy ran after them as good as he could, towing Sheena along with him, but Davy and Susanna sure could run.

'What's wrong with those guys!?' yelled Sheena.

'I don't know!' said Leroy.

Susanna and Davy yelled at people that they ran by on the street, scaring the shit out of them. They had to jump on top of every mailbox and trash can they came across, a lot of times knocking them over or falling on the ground. They came to an intersection and started jumping on the cars that were stopped at the red light. They jumped on the hood of one of the cars and looked through the windshield. They yelled at the top of their lungs and stuck their tongues out, and the poor fat guy in the driver's seat was scared out of his mind. He thought he ran into those killer teenagers that he heard about on the news.

Susanna and Davy jumped from the roof of car after car till they crossed the street and took off running again. They got to a row of parking meters.

'What the hell!?' yelled Susanna. 'This part of town totally sucks! They, like, actually charge people to park here?!'

Susanna grabbed a long pipe that happened to be laying in a nearby alley. She swung the pipe like a baseball bat and nailed one of those parking meters. She hit it several times until Davy kicked it like a martial artist, bending it over, then he kicked the top like a soccer ball and the coins erupted like a geyser with a piggy bank stuffed in it.

Just then Sheena and Leroy caught up with them, and Sheena laughed to see such wanton law breaking. Leroy looked in the distance to see two men pointing at Susanna and Davy, and one of them ran off, presumably to call the cops.

'Susanna!' yelled Leroy. He ran over and grabbed Susanna's pipe. 'If you get arrested, Dad will kill me!'

'You idiot!' said Susanna. 'I told you not to use my real name when I'm committing a crime.' She laughed.

'Susanna,' said Leroy.

'He's right,' said Davy, 'we've caused enough damage tonight.'

They walked back to Davy's car, Sheena under Leroy's arm, Susanna under Davy's. Leroy drove Davy's car 'cause he wasn't sure Davy could drive. The whole time Davy and Susanna giggled and Sheena held Leroy's arm. At first Sheena was annoyed by how protective Leroy was with his sister, but soon she found it endearing. She liked being with a man that thought so highly of his family.

They parked in front of Davy's garage. Leroy and Sheena stood in front of the El Camino kissing. Davy and Susanna sat on the hood of the car holding each other. Leroy broke from his kissing to look at his sister.

'What was with you guys?' said Sheena, to Davy and Susanna.

'I don't know,' said Davy, he looked at Susanna, 'I don't know.'

Now that night Susanna had her first real romantic kiss, and it was one of the greatest things she had ever experienced. But if you haven't guessed it was not Davy's first by a long shot.

But for some reason this night reminded him of his first kiss, his first girlfriend.

Davy's first girlfriend was a pretty little thing that had long curly brown hair and always wore a baseball cap for some reason. The first time they kissed Davy felt like he was on top of the world. And one day he took that pretty girl back to his room and took everything off her except that baseball cap. That night she swore that she would never leave him. That night she said she loved him at least a hundred times, but one day she told him she hated him. One day she told him, she hated him and that she never wanted to see him again. And as many times she said, "I love you," that one "I hate you," was enough to wipe them all out. One day the girl walked by him, refusing to notice him. She wasn't wearing that cap, and as far as Davy knew she never wore it again.

As Davy thought of that girl his eyes watered. Davy hadn't cried since he was four. It just wasn't in his nature, but sometimes his eyes watered, and they watered now. Now for the most part Davy didn't care what the hell that girl thought 'cause she was a willfully ignorant strumpet. But in Davy a fear brewed that Susanna could one day turn on him the same way that girl did. It was a fear that petrified him. It scared him 'cause even though Susanna wasn't his first kiss, somehow he felt like she was. Davy wasn't sure how or why but Susanna was his first real kiss. In the vernacular of the day Susanna made Davy feel like a virgin, shiny and new.

The girl that had never had a boyfriend put her head on Davy's chest, and he stroked her hair, and then she sat up.

'I totally feel like I'm drunk!' said Susanna. 'I've never drunk even and I feel like I'm drunk.'

'Let's call it a night,' said Davy. He kissed Susanna on the corner of her mouth, and she smiled. 'Leroy, you gonna take Sheena home?' asked Davy.

'Yeah, I think so,' said Leroy. 'I'll ask my parents if I can borrow the car.'

Susanna got down from Davy's car. Her hand was still in Davy's and they slowly pulled away from each other, smiling. Leroy and Sheena and Susanna walked to the Morgan house. Halfway there, Susanna lagged behind and started to touch her lips, and she smiled.

They were home pretty soon 'cause they lived next door. Clark was sitting on the outside couch. He looked at Susanna smiling and then looked at Leroy and Sheena.

'Oh my word,' said Clark, 'Sheena, you look more beautiful every time I see you.'

'You are such a corn ball, Mr. Morgan,' said Sheena.

'No one went to hell for being corny,' said Clark.

'Dad?' said Leroy. 'Can I use the car or van to drive Sheena home?'

'Sure' said Clark, 'take the Nissan, it takes less gas. And take all the time you want.'

'Don't worry,' said Sheena. 'He's going right there and back.'

'Great to hear it,' said Clark.

'Aw man,' said Leroy. He started mumbling to himself.

'Bye Mr. Morgan,' said Sheena, 'bye Susanna.'

Leroy and Sheena walked to the Nissan. Clark looked at his daughter and could tell she had something on her mind. She sat down next to him. Susanna breathed hard for a while.

'Dad?' said Susanna.

'Sweetheart,' said Clark.

'I kissed him,' said Susanna.

'Who?' said Clark.

'Davy,' said Susanna, 'who do you think? God!'

'I know,' said Clark, he grabbed his daughter, and kissed her on the forehead. 'Oh my God, my God. Why did you have to grow up so fast? My God.'

'I'm sorry,' said Susanna.

'Don't be too sorry,' said Clark, 'youth without age would be pointless. Few things in this life are permanent; at least you were a little girl once. But you can't be alone forever. But sometimes I have to admit that I wish you had pointy ears, a pig nose and buck teeth.'

'I wish I could turn it off and on sometimes,' said Susanna.

'Why don't you say we go in the kitchen and cut up your face?' said Clark.

'Dad,' said Susanna.

'I'll do it too,' said Clark. 'We'll look like Blofeld and daughter.'

'Dad, what do you think of him?'

'He's very immature,' said Clark, 'in a lot of ways he's just a boy. But he's very smart and very strong, and vary brave, and determined. Sometimes he seems kind.'

'Dad, he's very kind,' said Susanna. 'I didn't think so at first, but he is. One day after a guy at school had his pants glued to his chair and he ripped them off, Davy drove him home to get another pair of pants.'

'Who put the glue on his seat?' asked Clark.

'I did,' said Susanna, laughing, 'but it's not just that. One time everyone was making fun of this one kid and Davy got in front of them and said something nice about him. One time this kid was getting picked on by a bully and Davy hung out with him for weeks till the bully lost interest. He yelled at a guy for yelling at the lunch lady. He yelled at a teacher for yelling at a student.'

'I never thought I'd like a guy like that, but I don't know if I ever met a guy like that. I like it. He's a lot different than I thought he was.'

'That's interesting,' said Clark, 'that's very interesting... yes. I want you to have a kind man.'

'You know what's funny?' said Susanna, 'I heard a guy in the locker room was yelling at this other kid, "Get a haircut" and Davy was there, and he turned around looking badass and said, "You talking to me?" And that guy was all like "Uh... uh... No."' Clark laughed.

Clark stroked his daughter's long red hair. 'Just take it really slow,' he said, 'please.'

'Dad, I never want to disappoint you,' said Susanna. 'I'd rather die.'

Clark put his hand on her face and he knew she meant what she said. She curled up on her father's lap and he put his arms around her.

Some days later Davy, Susanna, Sheena and Leroy went to the outskirts of the town. In a parking lot near a farmers market, several punk bands started to play on a stage. None of the bands were known by anyone; it was enough that they were punk rock. Kids filled the parking lot and sat on cars on the edge of the crowd, and one of those cars was Davy's El Camino.

Song after song and band after band, kids danced in front of that stage. They danced without conventional grace or conventional beauty. Many had weird looking noses, or mono brows, or double chins. Many had Mohawks or mullets.

Then one band got on stage and started to sing a song that the kids never heard on the radio and never heard before or any time afterwards. They all had Mohawks except for their lead singer, who had short hair and a white shirt and tie. They couldn't understand a lot of the words but what they could understand of the chorus was:

'I want to be free, I want to be free, I want to be free.'

Sheena loved the song and wondered how her mother could say it was the devil's music, when freedom sounded more Christian than anything there was in the world.

"It's God's will that we should be free," her mother told her once.

Sheena looked at Leroy and they both jumped into the crowd and danced in front of the stage. Most of their dance was made up of head banging and jumping like they were on pogo sticks.

Soon more and more kids joined them and they started to march around in circles. Some head banged, some danced around like they were gorillas and some just jumped up and down. Whatever they were doing, they moved around in a great maelstrom of humanity, all with smiles on their faces. Anyone who saw the spectacle was either filled with terror or laughed with joy, 'cause it looked like freedom on the march.

Davy and Susanna thought about joining them but they knew this was Sheena's and Leroy's moment, just as the dance at Dan Webster's was theirs. They watched as random people did random dances and bashed into each other randomly, but seen from afar it didn't seem so random. It seemed to be controlled by a force of nature that tyrants still hadn't raped, and still couldn't control, and it was done by people that still couldn't be controlled. They were free.

Days later Susanna, Davy, Sheena and Leroy decided to go back to Dan Webster's. Despite their last outrage they still got in. Davy and Susanna were surprised to find that Leroy and Sheena were the first to start dancing, leaving Davy and Susanna on the sidelines. They soon saw that kids with Mohawks and mullets started to fill the dance floor and started to head bang, dance like gorillas or bounce up and down like pogo sticks, doing the same dance they did in front of that punk band. It was the wrong dance in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it was all intended. Recognizing the intended chaos, Davy and Susanna joined their friends.

Seeing that many teenagers dance the dance they were dancing, the bouncers turned on the lights and turned off the music. They then started grabbing kids and throwing them out of the building. All the kids stuck with it until they were picked off like surviving fish in a school being decimated by sharks.

In the street they started dancing, and jumping up and down. They continued until a cop car came, and they scattered.

That night Susanna danced in front of the bathroom mirror, she swayed her hips and banged her head.

'Boom, boom, boom, let's go back to my room,' she sang. Susanna spun around and noticed Danny in the doorway. Susanna looked at him and he smiled.

'What is that song about?' said Danny.

'It's about blowing stuff up,' said Susanna.

'In your room?' said Danny.

'Yeah so the cops don't catch you, stupid,' said Susanna.

'Mmm... that does sound like a song you'd like,' said Danny.

Chapter 24

The next day at school Susanna was skating down the hallway in her usual fashion. Davy came out of a room and saw her, and she looked back at him.

'Make way for the bad guy!' she yelled. 'Bad guy coming through!' But when Davy looked at her face, he heard, 'I'm yours, take me.' He grabbed her off the skateboard, spun around with her in his arms and kissed her. Davy put her down as she laughed. Susanna looked to see her skateboard stop against the wall.

'Hey you,' said Susanna, to a random boy, 'make yourself useful and bring it here.' The boy brought Susanna her skateboard.

'Thanks Bobby, how you doing?' said Davy.

'Pretty good,' said Bobby.

'Good!' yelled Susanna at Bobby. 'Now get lost, loser.'

'See you at lunch tomorrow, Bobby,' said Davy.

'Totally man,' said Bobby.

'We wou wat wunch Wobby,' mocked Susanna as they walked together, 'aren't you sweet.'

'Someone has to make up for you,' said Davy.

'No one can make up for me,' said Susanna, 'I'm pure evil.'

'Oh sure,' said Davy, 'but deep down you're a good girl.'

'Yeah, I'm the good girl from hell,' said Susanna.

They walked into the only class they had together and sat together. They hadn't always sat together but now they couldn't help it.

Neither one of those kids really learned anything in that class 'cause they knew so much already.

'During the Industrial Revolution, millions of people were thrown into poverty,' said the teacher, 'because jobs became too complicated for the common man to understand. We're facing a similar situation now, with the computer revolution. In the near future computers will take over thousands of jobs and render billions of people irrelevant and jobless.' Susanna stopped bothering to raise her hand 'cause the teacher had stopped bothering to call on her.

'And that's why a thousand years ago everyone was rich and life was perfect,' said Susanna, sarcastically, if you didn't know.

'Excuse me!' said the teacher.

'Why stop at computers?' said Susanna. 'Let's get rid of the printing press too. The peasants were happier when they couldn't read, anyway.' The other students giggled.

'Technology should address people's needs, not their wants,' said the teacher.

'Who decides that?' said Susanna. 'The wants of today are the needs of tomorrow. Our ancestors only needed trees and bananas, before that they only needed a warm rock and cockroaches. If you sentenced people to that

now it would be oppression, if not murder. If you deny people's wants, you deny their ability to evolve. People are poor because they're not allowed to make progress.'

'If life is so better now, then why are so many people so miserable?' the teacher said.

'Maybe they're always being told (lied to) that the only way they can succeed is to hurt other people, and the only way to be sinless is to be a failure. The mind can make a heaven out of hell and a hell out of heaven. But all the same, I'd rather live in heaven whatever the hell my mind is doing,' said Susanna.

'Is the guy who chooses what technology is good going to be the same guy who decides who's rich and who's poor?' Susanna continued, "Cause if I ever met that son of a bitch I'd fill him full of lead.' The other kids laughed. 'Half of the people in this room are alive because of technology invented in the last hundred years.

'Technology usually proliferates in free societies. And nobody forces people to use technology in a free society. People like the Amish don't use it; nobody's forcing you to, either. If you want to live in the Middle Ages, why don't you just do it alone?'

'Susanna Morgan!' yelled the teacher, 'principal's office now!'

'Fine,' said Susanna, getting up and walking out the door, 'I'm a political prisoner, I'm a political prisoner, all I got is my balls and my word.'

Davy got up. 'You should send me to the principal's office too,' he said.

'What for?' said the teacher.

'For walking out of class,' said Davy as he did just that.

The rest of the kids laughed.

Davy grabbed Susanna's hand and walked with her to the principal's office.

At lunch the next day Susanna and Davy stopped by the lunch hall to talk to Leroy and Sheena, and then to Bobby. Bobby was one of Davy's new projects. He was protecting him from bullying and teasing.

For the longest time Davy seemed like the resident Bruce Wayne of the high school, but now he seemed like the resident Batman, which was funny 'cause a lot of people felt like his girl friend was Lex Luthor.

'You should see this new comic, David,' said Bobby, just happening to talk about superheroes. 'At the end of the last issue Batman fights Superman. The only thing I hate about it was they had the Green Arrow at the end too.'

'Yeah, that guy's a dork, dude,' said Davy. 'I'm mostly just into Conan now, though.'

'I like Archie and Jug Head,' said Leroy.

'You're a Jug Head,' said Susanna.

'Whatever, Leroy,' said Sheena, 'you play the guitar way better than Jug Head.'

As the conversation ended Davy and Susanna started to walk by a row of tables as they made their way out of the lunch hall.

'Hey Susanna!' Davy and Susanna looked over to see Susanna's crying girl. 'How old are you? 'Cause I heard your mother is only twelve years older... 'cause she's a slut!'

'It doesn't work better if you explain it,' said a girl next to her.

Davy took a bite out of his candy bar and walked over and spit on crying girl's lunch. The girl got up, started crying, and ran away.

'That was mean,' said Leroy.

'That was awesome,' said Susanna grabbing Davy's arm, 'my hero.'

'Well I guess you can't be good all the time,' said Davy.

Later that day the kids heard Susanna's yelling through the hall, 'Make way for the bad guy! Bad guy coming through!' They looked to see Susanna riding on Davy's back and Davy riding on Susanna's skateboard.

'My God, there's two of them,' said another kid.

Davy spent so much time with Susanna and with the Morgans that sometimes the Morgans felt like they had another son. And with Davy's mother over, it was like there was an extra mother or aunt or something... well, they were like one family or something, you get it.

Sharon was always asking Davy's mother for cooking tips since Sharon was so horrible at cooking, and Davy's mother was hesitant at first but she eventually thought it was a shame to let all the work in that restaurant go to a complete waste.

'Pork chops, raisins and ketchup?' asked Sharon.

'And rice,' said Davy's mother, 'in fact, the Americans liked it so much that they called it "The American" or "American fried rice."'

'I don't know,' said Sharon, 'it sounds boring.'

'You keep putting ketchup on everything we make, so I figured why not. And you like pork chops. Don't worry,' said Davy's mother, 'I can make it really spicy, if you want.'

'Oh good,' said Sharon. 'Oh by the way, my nephews killed some snakes--they said so on the phone--and they said that they'd give me some tomorrow.'

'Oh good,' said Davy's mother, 'believe it or not, I kind of miss snake.'

'It's frozen, is that OK?' said Sharon.

'Oh sure,' said Davy's mother.

Meanwhile, across the room Clark was watching, listening and giving Davy pointers on playing the guitar. Susanna and the Morgan boys were gathered around, going back and forth between watching their father and Davy and watching TV.

While Davy was at the Morgan's house he talked with Clark as much as he talked to Susanna. Davy was still best friends with Leroy and spent probably more time with him than any of the Morgans. Davy's battle of

playful threats with Calvin had become more playful, and like the other Morgan children, he started to go to Calvin with problems he was too afraid or too embarrassed to go to any adult with. Enos and Danny were always telling Davy about their days or asking his opinions on things, just as Davy was always asking Clark's opinion on things.

'Mr. Morgan,' said Davy, 'who's your favorite guitar player ever?'

'I don't know, there's so many,' said Clark.

'I know it's weird, I was just wondering if you had some names,' said Davy, 'so I know who to pay attention to.'

'Lester Flatt was incredible,' said Clark, 'and it's said that no recording of Arnold Shultz has survived but Lester Flatt said the he was pretty damn good.' Clark could see by Davy's face that he had never heard of those men. 'Two you may have heard of that I thought, and most people thought, had a lot of talent were, of course, Jimmy Hendrix and Groucho Marx.'

'Groucho Marx?' asked Davy.

'Oh yeah,' said Clark, 'the guy was incredible on a guitar. He was a sarcastic asshole but that man could play. You know the Marx brothers when they first started out where just as much a music band as they were a comedy team.'

'Yeah, they were like the Ramones except they actually were related to each other,' said Susanna.

'I knew that,' said Leroy, 'I always knew they weren't related.'

'You didn't used to like Jimmy Hendrix,' yelled Sharon, 'but I turned you around.'

'No,' said Clark, 'I was just constructively critical.'

'Yeah right,' said Sharon, turning back to her cooking.

Davy played his guitar. 'I'm horrible,' he said, 'I should have been practicing more.'

'What's the matter?' said Clark. 'You're supposed to be having fun. It's called, "playing the guitar," not, "working the guitar." Concentrate on school and work, you can do this for fun. It will make you happier, trust me.'

Davy started to play again; when he stopped Danny looked up at him.

'Do you like The Road Runner?' asked Danny. Davy looked over and saw that The Road Runner was on TV.

'I love The Road Runner,' said Davy. 'I love all Chuck Jones cartoons but that one is like, the best.'

'Why?' said Danny.

'Cause, if you look at old movies like Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, they were Chuck Jones's greatest influences,' said Davy. 'They had to use physical comedy 'cause there was no sound then, but their style still carried on, after the talkies or whatever. The Road Runner is all weird sight gags and little to no dialogue, it's the perfect Chuck Jones cartoon. It actually uses the medium in a way that's unique to that medium. You could never make a Road Runner novel, or radio show, or painting, and even a comic book

or video game or live action movie wouldn't work as well as a cartoon. The Road Runner is a cartoon, period, and if you never see the cartoon you don't know what the Road Runner really is.'

Davy didn't just love comic books and paintings; he loved all kinds of art, including animation.

'You know what I wonder?' said Calvin. 'Why did it take so long to make movies with sound? I mean, they had records long before movies. Why didn't they just play those records for the movies?'

'I heard of a talking movie with Calvin Coolidge in it once,' said Susanna. 'But most movies didn't do it. A lot of rich guys and scientists thought that movies were just a curiosity not a legitimate art form, and that normal people wouldn't use it. It's similar to how some companies had the technology for personal computers in 1970, but they thought normal people weren't smart enough to use them. A lot of people thought the masses wouldn't be able to drive cars, either. Snobbery was holding back science and art for years, even decades.'

'I still don't think most people can drive a car,' said Sharon.

'I like the Tasmanian Devil,' said Enos.

'I always thought it was weird that the guy who invented the Tasmanian Devil, Rob McKimson,' said Davy, 'said that he wasn't that good a drawer till he got in a car crash and hit his head.'

'Weird?' said Enos.

'It made me wonder about idiot savants and the reptile brain,' said Davy. 'If people can get their head damaged to the point that they can just use their reptile brain, maybe people can get their head damaged to the point that they can just use their caveman brain. Maybe cavemen weren't dumber; maybe they were smarter, but they just didn't have good language skills. But then our evolution changed. Instead of having a bunch of geniuses that can't talk to each other, we evolved to have a handful of geniuses and the rest of us just spread their ideas around.'

'It's like how wolves have less flexible legs than cats but they make up for it by being more social.'

'Maybe that's why Einstein got lost walking home,' said Susanna. 'He was a throwback, and mentally handicapped, as far as socializing went.'

'It also kind of reminds me of Batman,' said Davy. 'I heard that sometimes extreme grief can cause brain damage, too. Maybe that's what happened to Batman. Maybe the genius and drive he has is a result of brain damage from the grief he had when his parents died.'

'I wonder if that's even an injury,' said Susanna. 'Maybe it's something humans evolved to. Maybe we're supposed to change under extreme stress. Like how grasshoppers can turn into locusts under stress. People can become geniuses under stress, but they might seem a little weird.'

'I think that's why some people think I'm so weird,' said Calvin, 'cause I'm really a genius.'

'People think you're weird 'cause you are weird; you're all idiot and no savant,' said Susanna.

'One of these days I'm goanna test Davy's theory on you,' said Calvin. 'I'll knock your head around and see if you get any smarter.'

Sometime later it was about time for Christmas, which snuck up on people in Los Fronteriza 'cause there was rarely any snow. The only real change in the weather was that it would usually rain like crazy. About that time, the Morgan parents would yell at those kids right and left to pull a tarp over the outside couch when they were done with it.

Susanna was usually the first to put up the tree, the old plastic tree that a bank was throwing out on one New Year's Day. Once Susanna put it up the rest of the family would usually get in the spirit, especially Danny and Enos, and would start decorating the thing, while listening to Christmas songs on the radio.

'Last Christmas, I gave you my heart, But the very next day, You gave it away.'

The decorations of the Morgans reflected their poor past. The Morgans could never afford real decorations, so they improvised. The Morgans would take old Cracker Jack prizes, Happy Meal toys, plastic dinosaurs and solders, tie strings around them and hang them up. They even hung up lighters and bottle caps that they scotch-taped newspaper and comic book clippings to. Danny, thinking nothing of it, even put his He-Man toy on the tree. He still played with it though even though it was on the tree.

Davy and his mother were over when the Morgans were decorating their tree. There was only one decoration on the Morgan tree that looked like it was a real store bought decoration. It looked like one of Raphael's cherubs, and looking like an angel, Sharon placed it at the top of the tree.

'Where did you get that one?' asked Davy's mother.

'It was on this box of chocolate I stole from a store I worked at,' said Sharon.

'You know I'm allergic to evergreen trees,' said Leroy, scratching his nose.

'It's not real,' said Enos.

Davy and Susanna sat on the couch holding hands and looking over the back at their families decorating the tree.

'People in ancient times thought that trees were sacred,' said Susanna. 'Vikings thought that the world was shaped like a tree, and the Minoans put a tree in the center of their cities for good fortune.'

'Is that where you think the Christmas tree came from?' said Davy.

'Kind of,' said Susanna, 'that's one of the reasons I like Christmas trees. That and Krampus.' They giggled.

They listened to song after song on the radio till they heard,

‘Face unafraid the plans that we made...’

And the two kissed.

Clark looked on and wasn’t mad like he thought he would be; in fact, he started to wonder if his daughter found the man that would take care of her when he was gone. He hoped so, but he was still cautious.

When the tree was done the families watched TV, Looney Tunes again.

‘Is the Tasmanian Devil really the new Santa Claus?’ said Danny.

‘That’s right,’ said Susanna, ‘Christmas Eve you better be in bed so you don’t get eaten... and leave ten dollars under the tree too.’

Davy’s mother always thought that a tree was just something she was expected to do. Her tree only had red balls and lights; she never thought that something like this could be such a source of self-expression. That night when Davy and his mother got home, Davy’s mother retrieved an old wooden elephant that she played with as a child. She tied a string around it and hung it on her tree.

Some days later Sharon took Danny to the mall to see Santa Claus so he could see he wasn’t really replaced by the Tasmanian Devil. Danny waited in line to see Big Red, while the other kids begged for whatever. When it was Danny’s turn he walked up and sat on Santa Claus’s lap.

‘Ho, Ho, Ho,’ said Santa, ‘what’s your name?’

‘Danny sir,’ said Danny, ‘but I was wondering about your name, are you called Santa Claus ‘cause you’re from Santa Cruz?’

‘Well I’ve spent some time there,’ said Santa. ‘Have you been good this year?’

‘Yes Sir,’ said Danny, ‘but my sister has been awful.’

Santa laughed and then went into the ‘Ho-Ho-Ho’ thing. ‘Look, tell me what you want, and I’ll see if I can fit it my sleigh,’ said Santa. Danny hadn’t thought about that. He had a He-man action figure and Ghostbusters on VHS, he had a warm bed and food in his belly. Danny asked for the only thing he could think of.

‘Umm... uhh... I want a candy bar,’ said Danny.

‘Here you go kid,’ said Santa as he handed him a Hersey bar and sent him on his way. Danny joined his mother.

‘So, what did you ask Santa for?’ asked Sharon.

‘Dagnabbit, I should have asked for a robot rhinoceros,’ said Danny.

That Christmas Eve the Morgans sat in front of the TV as a news flash came on the screen.

‘This just in, Santa Claus has been sighted in Jamaica,’ said the reporter.

'You hear that Danny?' said Sharon. 'That's only a couple time zones away. You should at least go to bed and pretend to be asleep.'

'Why does Santa Claus want kids in bed when he comes?' said Danny. 'It's not even a school night.'

'You have to be asleep, those are the rules,' said Sharon. 'Besides you can't argue with the results, you always get a present.'

'Yeah, but you know what?' said Danny. 'I don't think Santa Claus's elves really made those toys. I think he just got them used or something. That one racecar had someone else's name written on the bottom.'

'Give Santa a break,' said Calvin, 'there was a recession on.'

'I like recesses,' said Danny.

'At least you didn't get a pet rock,' said Susanna. 'Sure could break a window though.'

'Besides,' said Clark, 'you should get some sleep 'cause we're going to see Uncle Cletus tomorrow.'

'Could you tell Bubba not to throw me so high?' said Danny, 'I think I hit a bird one time.'

'Me too,' said Calvin.

'Are we going to go to get food at that one church again?' said Danny.

'Wasn't planning on it,' said Clark.

'Why did we go to another church instead of the one we went to?' asked Danny.

'Because a lot of the people at our church were poorer than we were,' said Calvin.

'Why aren't we going there?' said Danny.

'We don't need to this year,' said Sharon, 'now go to bed.'

'OK,' said Danny, 'come on Enos, we have to go to bed before Santa Claus gets here.' Everyone looked at Enos. At first Enos felt embarrassed, then he felt mad, then he started laughing.

'Sure Danny,' said Enos, 'come on, let's go.'

'That's very mature of you,' said Clark to his third son. And Clark wasn't being sarcastic or joking; he was serious and Enos knew it.

When Danny was out of ear shot Susanna spoke.

'Santa Claus is so weird,' said Susanna. 'Every other parent in the world puts presents under the tree and says it's Santa. And even other adults get in on it, even the news, even N.O.R.A.D. It's probably the only conspiracy that's ever really worked.'

That next day... Well, Christmas Day. The Morgans stopped at that church anyway.

'You said we weren't going this year,' said Danny.

'Well you got me thinking,' said Clark, 'maybe if we aren't taking out, maybe we should put in.'

The Morgans took bags out of their van filled food from their fridge and pantry. When they brought them into the church, the woman there said they already had more than enough food but the Morgans gave what she would take.

When they got to Cletus's trailer, Danny ran to show Cletus, Lenard and Bubba his He-Man sitting on his new steed, Battle-Cat, and his new friend Man-at-Arms.

'That's awesome ,Danny,' Said Cletus.

'That guy must have had a hell of a time dying his cat's hair green,' said Lenard.

'I'm totally buffer than that guy,' said Bubba.

'And we helped people too,' said Danny, 'like He-Man. But we didn't get to punch bad guys. Maybe next year.'

After school had started again the kids came home from school one day and saw on the news that a new holiday had been declared, Martin Luther King Day.

At first Susanna and Davy thought that the holiday was just a publicity stunt and not worth paying attention to, but one day they started swapping stories on some of the horrible incidents that their parents recalled and realized that their relationship would be looked down on in darker times if not impossible. Then they started to think that maybe it was important. They had read that in the old days people would leave food at the graves and monuments of saints and heroes and as the day approached to honor the occasion, Los Fronteriza changed the name of one of its streets to Martin Luther King St. In front of the new street sign Davy and Susanna put a bag of Queen Cali food, and when they left it there it eventually disappeared, and as far as they knew M.L.K. himself arose from the grave and ate it.

Chapter 25

Some days after that Davy and Susanna were picking up groceries and Susanna noticed Davy looking at the beer and licking his lips. The cravings hit him sometimes, even though his mother wouldn't let him drink anymore, and his Buddhist teacher and Susanna's Pastor told him not to, and he was starting to trust them all. But still the cravings hit him sometimes, like a hard gust of wind and sometimes that wind was strong enough to blow a tractor trailer off a freeway.

Susanna knew Davy had a sketchy past, but she underestimated how sketchy, and she over estimated how much he was over it.

That night Davy, Susanna, Sheena, and Leroy hung out like they did on many nights. Sometimes they hung out in Susanna's living room and sometimes they hung out in Davy's living room. Sometimes they hung out in Davy's garage and sometimes they hung out in Susanna's garage. Sometimes they hung out at the local gas station, whether they bought something or not. Sometimes the clerk would come out to tell them to leave. Sometimes they would and sometimes they wouldn't. And sometimes, like on this night I'm talking about, they would just sit on the bed of Davy's El Camino, with the windows rolled down and the radio on. One time they screwed that battery all up.

They did nothing special; they just listened to music, talked, kissed and argued about what they should do that night, and they usually ended up doing nothing.

Usually when Davy and Susanna talked, Leroy and Sheena would make fun of them, and when Leroy and Sheena talked Davy and Susanna would make fun of them.

'God really,' said Sheena, 'you never drank ever?'

'No, not never ever,' said Susanna. 'I told you that dude.'

'It's true,' said Leroy.

'I kind of like it,' said Davy.

'How come you never drank?' said Sheena. 'You've had chances, right?'

'Yeah, I just... My parents told me not to,' said Susanna.

'Well I love drinking,' said Sheena, 'not just 'cause it feels good but I don't like being told what to do.'

'Hmm,' Susanna smiled. She didn't like the idea of drinking, but she liked the idea of breaking petty laws. 'Maybe we could get some tonight.'

'You don't have to,' said Davy, 'and besides we don't have anyone to get it for us. Davy wasn't sure if he wanted to drink with Susanna, but one of those cravings was hitting him.

'You should hear the stunt Leroy pulled one time,' said Susanna.

'Oh, what was it?' said Sheena.

'It's not that interesting,' said Leroy.

"This one guy carded him and said, "You're not old enough," than Leroy said, "but, it's 1992, I'm totally old enough to buy beer." Everyone but Leroy laughed.

'Like if he couldn't lie about his birthday he'd lie about the date,' concluded Susanna.

'What about Calvin, buying beer?' said Sheena.

'No, he'd have to drive all the way to Arizona, I think,' said Davy, 'besides, he wouldn't buy beer for Susanna.'

'Dude,' said Susanna, 'like let's just steal it; people do it all the time.' That was the main reason Susanna wanted to drink--she wanted to break rules. Susanna shoved Davy almost out of the bed of the car. 'Come on Davy, start up the Camino.'

They drove to a Circle K, 'Stop stop stop,' said Susanna. 'Now keep the car running. Sheena, distract the clerk and I'll grab a case of beer.'

'No, no, no dude,' said Sheena, 'why do I have to distract the clerk? I don't want to be in this.'

'You're a pretty girl,' said Susanna, 'you're like perfect for distracting the Clerk. It's a guy, right? Yeah, it's a guy.'

'Well why can't you distract him?' said Sheena. 'And Davy or Leroy can steal it.'

'Dude, 'cause I want to steal it,' said Susanna, 'and Davy's driving the car and Leroy... Well we love Leroy but he'll totally mess it up somehow dude.'

'Maybe. I just have a bad feeling about it,' said Sheena. Sheena talked tough, but sometimes she'd panic easily.

'Come on Sheena,' said Susanna, 'where's that punk girl attitude? This will be most irreproachable.'

'Oh man,' Sheena said, getting out. Susanna grabbed some mud off the ground and put it on the license plate. 'What are you doing?' said Sheena.

'Covering the license plate so if he sees it he won't... you know,' said Susanna, 'Now ask the guy for directions, and smile a lot.'

'Oh man,' said Sheena.

'Go. Before me,' said Susanna. Sheena walked inside and walked up to the clerk.

'Hi, I'm new here--in town, I mean--and I was looking for the uh... tanning salon,' said Sheena. God damn it, she thought, Tanning salon? Is that the best I could think of? She looked to see Susanna walk in, pretending to not know her.

'Hi,' said the clerk to Susanna.

'OK,' said Susanna.

Susanna stood behind the clerk and motioned for Sheena to smile, and she did.

'Are you sure you just moved here?' said the clerk, to Sheena. 'I'm sure I've seen you here before.'

'Oh yeah... I mean no, that's not me,' said Sheena, she tried to change the subject, 'So uh... you live here... I mean you work here?'

'Yeah,' said the clerk, 'I'm working here right now.'

Sheena laughed. 'Just joking. But it sounds like a nice place to work.'

'Not really,' he said. 'There're always people trying to steal stuff.' Just behind the clerk Sheena saw Susanna in a crunched-over waddle carrying two big cases of beer. The clerk followed Sheena's eyes to Susanna.

'Come on dudette!' Susanna yelled, running out the door, and Sheena ran behind her.

'Hey!' said the clerk.

Susanna jumped in the bed of the El Camino with the beer and pounded on the cab and Davy started to pull away. Sheena ran away from that clerk and jumped into the moving car.

'You just got Okie doked, dork!' yelled Susanna at the clerk.

They parked in Davy's driveway and went into his garage. They turned on the radio and sat on boxes and put the two cases of beer in front of them like a camp fire.

'Why did you get Blue Ribbon?' said Sheena.

'You mean why did I steal Blue Ribbon? And what's wrong with that?' said Susanna.

'That's like redneck beer,' said Sheena.

'Don't be a bigot, Sheena,' said Susanna.

'What!?' said Sheena. 'Excuse me white girl.'

'Dude,' said Susanna, 'not all white people are rich tyrants or stupid thugs and they don't all have the same beliefs and way of life. When peaceful people fight each other the powers that be win.'

'Stupid white girl,' said Sheena.

'You know,' said Davy, 'I think beer tastes better out of a glass.'

'You wuss,' said Susanna.

'Dork,' said Sheena. Leroy laughed.

And Susanna drank her first beer, and the alcohol went to her brain and filled it with happiness and confusion and a veil went between her and the world. It made her laugh to realize that beer really did affect a person in such a way. She had almost thought it was a myth.

The kids talked friendlier and more openly with that drink in them. And despite the race war that almost erupted, Susanna and Sheena ended up in each other's arms singing punk songs.

'...I make collision with collision lost inside this manned collision just to see that what is to be perfectly my Manatee ...' they sang, over and over again almost making a competition of who could remember the song better.

Eventually Sheena and Leroy took to kissing, and Susanna and Davy took to talking to each other.

'You know,' said Susanna, 'you're a dork but a real good artist.'

'Thanks,' said Davy, 'I think so.'

'Da Dink Do,' said Susanna, 'do you have any of them here?'

'I've got all of them here,' said Davy.

'Show them to me,' said Susanna, as she leaned forward, looking at him with sleepy eyes.

'I don't know,' said Davy.

'Do it!' half yelled Susanna, pushing Davy so hard he fell off the box he was sitting on.

Sheena turned around and Leroy looked at them. 'Make love not war, guys,' said Sheena.

'No,' said Leroy, 'you shouldn't do any of those things.'

'Don't worry Leroy,' said Susanna. 'Come on Davy, let's go look at your pretty pictures.' She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him out the door. They walked down the hallway to Davy's room and opened that door. Davy rushed around the room picking up loose clothes and trash. Susanna seemed bored with the display, until she noticed his TV and VCR on a dresser and the three VHSs next to it. 'Fire and Ice,' 'Vampire Hunter D,' and 'The Last Unicorn.'

'You've been watching "The Last Unicorn?"' said Susanna.

'Hey look,' said Davy, 'I think The Last Unicorn, is a great story showing the difference between mythology and faith. And how mythology can corrupt faith but also lead someone to it.'

'Why do you like those other movies?' said Susanna.

'I like the girls in them,' said Davy.

Susanna giggled as she noticed the Conan and Li'l Abner posters all over the walls.

'You like Frank Frezetta,' said Susanna.

'Yeah,' said Davy.

'That's Kool,' she said. 'You said before, didn't you? Yeah, he's incredible. Show me your stuff.'

'Stuff?' said Davy.

'Don't be a smart ass,' said Susanna. Davy took out one of his paintings. 'God,' said Susanna, 'you think you painted the boobs on that chick big enough?'

'Sometimes you have to exaggerate to make a point,' said Davy.

'Yeah, a point in your pants, joystick,' said Susanna.

'I did the same for the muscles on the guy,' said Davy. 'Most guys don't have muscles like that.'

'My cousin Bubba does,' said Susanna.

'Yeah, but he doesn't fight dinosaurs,' said Davy. 'My point is that sexuality in art is a way of inducing empathy or something.'

'Ego projection,' said Susanna, smiling.

'That's... I've heard worse names for it,' said Davy. He took out another painting.

'I guess my love of Picasso rubbed off on you,' said Susanna.

'Yeah, I tried to do something like that but it really didn't work out I think,' said Davy.

'It kind of looks like a blurred photo, like a... a...,' said Susanna.

'Like someone left the shutter open too long,' said Davy.

'It's kind of Kool,' said Susanna, 'like a... It's weird that a human could paint that.'

'Yes but,' said Davy, 'at first I liked it, but now I think it looks too much like a photo. It was a good exercise but I don't think I'll do it again.'

Davy took out another painting.

'That's that king Nar... you were talking about,' said Susanna, 'most auspicious.'

'King Naresuan,' said Davy. 'I painted it last Thursday night, it's not done yet, obviously.'

'You like, painted this all in one night?' said Susanna.

'Yeah,' said Davy.

'That's totally why you were so tired that day,' said Susanna.

'I've never made anything like this before,' said Davy. 'I'm not even sure I know enough to even paint it. The armor is probably wrong.'

'Neo Ad Fontes... Leonardo totally didn't know about everything he painted, either,' said Susanna. 'He drew a battle scene where he just made up what the uniforms and armor looked like, and he had them wearing sea shells 'n stuff. I wish I could remember the name of it. King Naresuan had guns and swords, like a pirate. That was an awesome part of history. Although I think the elephant is like, way too big.'

'Exaggerate to make a point,' said Davy.

'You say that just to have an excuse for sex and violence,' said Susanna.

'No,' said Davy, 'it's romantic.'

'Guys aren't romantic,' said Susanna, 'not without wanting something.'

'Maybe they would be if they weren't teased for it,' said Davy.

Davy put his three paintings up against the wall, and he sat on his bed while holding Susanna's hand. He pulled on her till she sat on his lap. He kissed her and they put their foreheads against each other. Susanna noticed, in the corner leaning up against the wall, a Viking sword in a sheath.

'Do you think we really have that much in common?' said Susanna.

'In all the ways I'm good you're bad and all the ways you're good I'm bad.'

'Maybe that makes us better for each other,' said Davy, 'but I think we have a lot in common. We have the same beliefs. We're both misunderstood. I don't even think I understood myself until I met you.'

'I can talk to you about a lot of strange things without being afraid of being looked down on. I haven't felt this comfortable around a girl since I was in elementary school. I mean, I had girlfriends before but I didn't really act like myself around them, or around my other friends. It was like it was a big dodge.'

'I'm starting to think I didn't like a lot of what my old friends said or did, I just went along with it 'cause I didn't want to be alone.'

'Davy, I just started to think that you're good and stuff,' said Susanna softly, her head on his shoulder, 'and I just really want to...' She nodded off; believe it or not, she was out. And Davy started to think she had a lot more than he thought. What? Davy thought, You really want to do what? He had a girl in his room sitting on his bed, a beautiful girl, and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. Well he knew what he was supposed to do, but something in him started to look for a loophole.

Davy stared at her. Her face was perfect except for those fat blowfish lips. He looked down to her neck and down to her body: her deep cleavage framed by her purple tank top, her thin waist, her curving hips hugged by her blue jeans, and her muscular but gracefully slender thighs and shins.

He put his hand on one of her legs and then put one of his fingers between the strap of her bra and the incredibly soft skin wrapped around her strong shoulder. He pulled his hand away and couldn't help but stare at her, and dark thoughts entered his mind, thoughts so black that he couldn't help but love them in the moment and hate them in the future. His hand seemed to hover above her like a pondering claw.

'What are you doing?' Davy heard a voice say. The voice wasn't angry or hateful, it was plain. Davy looked up at a silhouetted man in his bedroom doorway. The figure filled him with terror. It had no sympathy and no regret in it, only cold action. Davy studied the face half terrified, and realized it was Leroy, only it wasn't. It was Leroy save his eyes. His eyes were replaced with shadows with pinpoint highlights piercing through the darkness. Davy looked at Leroy's face and like his voice it had no anger or hate in it. Leroy never felt hate or anger to any human ever, but he was filled with an unnamed emotion that scared Davy even more. Now Davy had had his share of fights, and he won most of them, and most of the time he could easily beat Leroy, but this sure as hell wasn't "most of the time." Davy knew that if even an atom was out of place, Leroy would kill him, and I mean that literally, for real, I really do. That boy would skin the other with his bare hands and whatever he could find at the time, and Davy had no fury to muster that could match Leroy's. He would kill that other boy, his best friend, and go eat dinner and sleep well that night. Leroy would go in front of a judge and plead guilty with pride. He'd go to the pearly gates and say in the face of God 'I'm proud of what I did, let me in!' Leroy would kill him.

'What are you doing?' said Leroy.

'Nothing,' said Davy. He picked Susanna up and put her in Leroy's arms. 'We should just get her home,' said Davy.

'Davy, I want to set something on fire,' said Susanna. Yes, she was drunk, but she wasn't that drunk.

Leroy took his sister home and walked his girlfriend to the bus stop with Davy trailing him. Davy said goodbye to his friend that night and Leroy

seemed like the same kind man he always was, but Davy could almost smell that monster that was still in his friend.

Now at the risk of sounding anti-dramatic, I have to say that Davy never would have done anything; he was a good boy despite all his dirtiness. And therefore Leroy would never have to kill him. But as Davy lay on his bed he started to think that he was having another Twilight Zone moment. He had peered into an alternate dimension where he saw how the time line would fork. On one side he was a villain, on the other side he was still trying to be a hero. And yes, Davy had a dark thought, but who doesn't have one now and then? Davy realized that night that a part of him would always be dark, but that part had to stay in its place or Davy would never forgive himself.

Susanna woke up from her stupor as she had seen her mother do many times. Apparently she had been sleeping on her bed, and she had a dark thought, until she sat up. Susanna sat up and realized that Leroy was sitting on the end of her bed smiling at her. His eyes sparkled and his face was pleasant and beautiful like an angel's. In his face Susanna saw the purest love she had ever seen in any person. Susanna smiled like she won the lotto. She realized that the whole night she couldn't had been safer than if she was a golden statue in Fort Knox. She realized that as long as he lived he would protect her, even if it would mean his life. He would never tell her what to do, he would never judge her--that was her parents' job and sometimes Calvin's--but Leroy would always protect her no matter what, to his dying breath.

Leroy had few qualities, but one was that he was perfectly honest. If someone asked him a question he answered and he told them the truth, or he didn't answer at all, most the time. If he agreed to do something he would give his life to do it, if he had to. And above all he never lied to himself. Leroy usually seemed weaker and dimmer than normal people, but that quality of honesty gave him bouts of strength and intelligence that leaped on the prejudice like a mountain lion.

It was probably the same reason he was slow to violence or even raising his voice. Leroy used his reason, as weak as it was, and despite its weakness it drove through others like a bulldozer. 'Cause it was based on the laws God used to rule creation. He was honest.

The two siblings sat there and smiled at each other, they even giggled off and on, they smiled at each other for an hour. Until the silence was finally broken.

'Leroy, I love you,' said Susanna just before she kissed him on the cheek, and he stroked her hair and put her hair behind one of her ears. 'Do Mom and Dad know?'

Leroy shook his head side to side. 'I wouldn't tell them, unless you wanted me to.'

'Thank you,' said Susanna.

Susanna grabbed him by the neck and laid him down next to her and she slept the rest of the night in his arms.

The next day Susanna sat on the outside couch next to her father and mother while he was playing the guitar. They looked at her and realized that something was wrong.

'I got to tell you something and it's not easy,' said Susanna, 'so I'm just going to say it. I drank a bunch of beer last night and I was kind of drunk, kind of.'

'What!?' said Sharron. A rage built in her so hot that Susanna's mother visibly turned red in a second; she had a scowl like an enraged troll. Sharon was about to get up but Clark put his hand on hers. Susanna looked at her mother and then her father and whatever fear she had of her mother was dwarfed by her fear of her father. His face turned to her and she swore his eyes were replaced with seething black tar pits.

'You didn't do this alone,' said Clark, 'I'm sure of that; was Davy involved with this?'

'He... he... was,' said Susanna, 'but it wasn't his idea. I don't think he even wanted to at first. So don't think he's some kind of bad influence. But... I just wanted to... do something...'

'Bad,' said Clark. When Susanna said she'd rather be dead than disappoint her father, she meant it, and believe it or not, she hadn't done it with this last escapade. It was only beer and Clark was amazed that she actually told him and her mother. He knew it took more bravery than he had when he was a child. Clark was in a strange way relieved that his daughter had gone out in the world and somehow returned innocent. He and Sharon had to be doing something right. Clark looked at his daughter as she started to pant and buried her face in her hands, on the verge of crying. He knew she was genuinely sad for the fear and anger she roused in her parents by disobeying them in one of her adventures, but disobeying this law wasn't acceptable.

Susanna was acting like a bitch and she had to pay. You see, even when Susanna was a toddler she had few vices and Clark and Sharon broke her of all of them--all the major ones, anyway, except for one. Susanna just loved to cause trouble. There are some people that couldn't pass a clock without correcting it, but Susanna couldn't pass a clock without making it wrong, if she didn't break it. Clark knew Susanna wasn't the kind to drink to impress her peers; she was never inclined to impress anyone save her family and her God. Besides the two authorities she respected, she hated any and all others: she hated the cops, she hated the robbers, she hated her teachers, she hated the delinquents, she hated every talking head on television, maybe even the president, maybe even the sun in the sky. That was as close as Clark came to understanding his daughter's one last great vice, her bitchiness. Clark knew he had to cut it down whenever it surfaced in excess, lest she get herself killed someday.

Susanna looked at her father and the pools of tar in his eyes lightened.

'First I have to tell you,' said Clark, 'I'm very proud you came and told us this, but this is unacceptable.'

'I'm so sorry dad,' said Susanna, almost crying.

'You're going pay for this,' said Clark. 'We're going to make you understand that you can't follow every cockamamie urge that pops into that head of yours, even if we have to break it. You're grounded for two months--no TV, no radio, no books unless they're part of an assignment from church or from school. When you're not at school or church or at work, you're in your room. If you don't obey this, those two months get longer. And no kissing either. When we're convinced you can fly without running into windows, we'll let you out of the cage again.'

Susanna looked at her father and those pits had subsided as she started to understand that she wasn't as bad off as she could have been. Clark lifted his hands off his wife's and it was like he released a dog meaner than Shere Khan. Sharon Morgan stood up and started slapping her daughter left and right.

'Git to your room! Git to your room!' yelled Sharon, slapping her daughter. Susanna, with her face red, stood up to go, but every time she tried to go to her room her mother would slap her. Susanna inched her way to her room, being stopped and slapped by her mother every one of those inches, till Susanna was finally in her room and her mother slammed the door on her.

Clark went over to Davy's house and knocked on the door. His mother opened the door.

'What's the matter?' she said, seeing he was upset.

'My daughter and your boy were drinking last night,' said Clark. Davy's mom looked behind her. Davy was there.

'Davy, I told you not to do that,' said Davy's mother. The sincerity of Susanna transferred to her father and Davy's mother could read it.

'Can I talk to him?' said Clark.

'Yes,' said Davy's mother. She trusted him completely.

'Kid, I like you,' said Clark, 'but you can't be doing what you did last night. This isn't the first time for you, I'm sure. Look, if I find out that you did something like this again,' said Clark, 'or if my daughter does it and you don't tell me, you can't see her anymore. In fact, I might put you down in a puddle of your own blood.'

'David, you should listen to him,' said Davy's mother.

'I'm sorry, Mom,' said Davy. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

Clark held Davy's mother's hand while they talked, until they said goodbye.

'Mom, I know you don't want me to drink anymore but aren't you carrying this too far?' said Davy.

'David,' said his mother, 'I know Mr. Morgan is a shock to you sometimes; he's a shock to me too. But he means well and sometimes I think you need a shock.'

Davy was in shock. He wanted to cut down on his drinking but he hated being forced; in fact, he was as angry as a badger. But Davy had the brains to hold his temper. There wasn't anything he could do, unless he wanted to get beaten to a pulp by Clark or risk spending the rest of his life sleeping outside. Susanna was turning his world upside down.

The next school day Davy ran to meet Susanna and Leroy, and Davy was surprised to see Susanna without her skateboard and wearing a long black skirt and a modest blouse. Her hair wasn't tied up, though.

'What the... Why are you dressed like that?' said Davy.

'She's seeking a more pea'ist life,' said Leroy.

'That's pious!' yelled Susanna. 'You stupid... fellow child of God.'

'Why are you doing this?' said Davy.

'Look, I can't say that I wouldn't have done it knowing the consequences,' said Susanna, "cause I did and... well, you know.'

'What?!' said Davy. 'You just sound stupid. Did you tell your father about us drinking, Leroy?'

'What? No!' said Leroy.

'Susanna!' said Davy. 'It was your idea to steal that beer in the first place. How could you tell your parents?'

'Look, I can't just keep something like that from my parents,' said Susanna, 'and I can't lie to them. So if I want to live a little I have to pay for it.'

'Oh my God,' said Davy, 'you're crazy.'

'You said it yourself, Davy,' said Susanna, 'that no one understands me.'

'Well how long is this going to last?' said Davy.

'I've been grounded for two months,' said Susanna, 'maybe that long.'

'Two months?!' said Davy.

Just when Davy thought he was making some headway with this girl, it felt like he had just been put on hold.

The whole time at school the other kids were surprised to see Susanna without her skateboard and almost dressed like she would when she went to church. The other kids made fun of her but Susanna ignored them. She never had one of her usual outbursts or bitchy trouble making, and those teachers were glad for the break. At lunch she only sat on a bench and pretty much did nothing.

Davy sat next to her and they talked as usual, but Davy tried to kiss her and she refused.

'I just need a break,' said Susanna.

'Oh my God, Susanna,' said Davy, 'Susanna, I don't know if I can take this.' She grabbed his hand and then touched his face, and then his lips.

'Davy, please,' she said. Davy looked at her with the wind lazily blowing her hair. Her eyes, her beautiful pleading eyes, tugged at him.

The whole day Davy was angry. If any other girl did this to him he would break up with her, and he pondered the same for Susanna, but he just couldn't stand it. He thought about threatening her with it, but somehow he knew she'd just accept it and say it proved that he really wasn't her kind of guy.

For a month Susanna wore that skirt, at school and at work, and Davy tried to kiss her several times but she wouldn't have it. Sometimes she even smiled, sometimes she looked at him as if to say, Don't you know I want to. Davy often looked at other girls that would have done more than kiss him if he left Susanna, but they just seemed pale and hollow next to the girl he really wanted, and he was amazed at just how much he actually wanted her.

Yes, Susanna only wore that skirt for a month, and when she was wearing overalls again Davy thought it was over, but Susanna said she still had one month left. They held hands and touched each other's faces but they never kissed. Within reason Susanna kept to the punishment her father designed and maybe even a little bit beyond reason.

Two months to the day Susanna was waiting outside Davy's door as he opened it to go to school.

'Susanna, what is it?' said Davy. Susanna said nothing but only ran her hands through his long black hair. As they made their way around the back of his neck, Davy put his hands on her waist and they kissed. The two kissed more passionately than they had ever kissed each other. Susanna picked up her skateboard with one hand and grabbed Davy's hand with the other and like that they walked to the bus stop, and Susanna's typical self returned.

As Davy looked at the girl he waited for, he had a feeling that he could only describe as ownership. He owned her and she owned him, and Davy didn't feel enslaved by this, he felt completed; he felt like Voltron after all those cats came together to make that giant robot.

That day they sat on the roof of the school for the first time in two months, and Leroy and Sheena were with them.

'So you really think Crockett and Tubbs could beat Starsky and Hutch?' said Leroy.

'Oh yeah dude,' said Davy, 'But here's a hard one--who would win in a fight between Obi Wan Kenobi's ghost and the Ghost Busters?'

'Oh man,' said Leroy, 'that is a hard one.'

'I can't believe the stupid things guys talk about,' said Sheena.

'Yeah,' said Susanna, 'I'm sure the G.I. Joes could beat most of the Super Friends but how could they beat Superman?'

'Kryptonite tipped sidewinder missiles,' said Leroy.

'Yeah, weren't you listening?' said Davy.

'See, stupid,' said Susanna.

'Oh yeah,' said Sheena.

They laughed and talked, they kissed and danced. They were a group of friends that were rarely seen apart.

Chapter 26

The old lady from the health department put a thermometer in every last French fry Queen Cali had under a heat lamp and finally looked back up at Mr. Coria.

'This one is three degrees off,' said the old woman. 'That will 'cost you some points.'

'Are you kidding?' said Coria. 'Over one French fry? And my thermometers are better than that one.' Coria was right, his thermometers were computerized. The health department's thermometers looked like something out of the 19th century.

'It's just a mark down,' said the woman. 'I can't flunk you. But someday I might.'

'What complaint did this guy have?' said Coria. 'Is he OK? I mean, did he see a doctor?'

'Oh no,' said the health inspector, 'he just made an anonymous complaint.'

Meanwhile, in the back, the kids decided to goof off while Coria was distracted.

'My first job was on a farm,' said Leroy. 'It's a lot different than this.'

'Well you know,' said Davy, 'if you think about it, it isn't that different here. It's just that all the animals are dead.'

'Oh yeah,' said Leroy, laughing.

'Hey Leroy,' said Davy, 'you want to play Iceman vs. Mr. Freeze?'

'OK,' said Leroy.

Davy and Leroy grabbed ice out of the Queen Cali ice maker and started throwing the cubes at each other.

'Take that, Mr. Freeze!' said Leroy.

'Ouch!' said Davy. 'Take that, Iceman!'

'Ouch!'

Then Susanna emerged with a God damn cigarette lighter and a can of Pam. She held them up and shot flames at the boys, making them jump backwards. You remember that old trick.

'What the hell are you doing!?' said Davy.

'I'm the, Human Torch, dumbass,' said Susanna.

The health department lady looked at the kids and was amazed that Coria only grumbled to himself.

'How can you stand to let those kids act so unprofessional?' the lady said.

'A warm body is better than no one,' said Coria.

'If I had to choose between that and no one,' she said, 'I'd rather just close my business down.'

'I'd rather make money than control people,' said Coria. 'Experience has taught me those two don't usually go together.'

Coria power walked back to the kids.

'You idiots stop messing around! And get the prep cooking done!' he yelled. 'We're going to have a dinner rush in ten minutes!'

'I just don't understand it,' said the health inspector as she walked out.

"Anonymous complaint," said Coria sarcastically. 'Some random idiot bites their tongue and makes an "Anonymous complaint." Other people get to face their accusers, why not me?'

'Yeah, if people don't like this place they just shouldn't come,' said Susanna.

'She kept talking about how I should get new pans to put the vegetables for the sandwiches in,' said Coria. 'There's only two differences between those pans and mine, those pans are a quarter of an inch deeper and they cost four times as much. The money they want me to spend on those pans I could use to hire a new employee. She said it wasn't a law but that someday it might be and I should do it just because those pans are better. I wonder who makes those pans?'

'Yeah, what a bitch,' said Susanna.

'Get back to work!' said Coria.

At Queen Cali it had only gotten busier and to make things worse, Mr. Coria had started to think that Susanna was maybe stealing money.

'There's no maybe about it,' yelled Coria, 'you're stealing money!'

'That's like, total bullshit,' said Susanna. 'I wouldn't steal a slice of bread to feed a starving orphaned nun for all the tea in China.' Susanna was lying; she had been stealing--not that much mind you, but she had to steal something, to be bad. In fact Susanna was famous among the employees for stealing money from the safe and using it to order a pizza or Chinese food every time she was the only manager. She shared the food with the employees if they didn't piss her off.

Later Coria took Davy aside. 'Look, Ping Pong,' said Coria, 'I'm not going to leave that psycho hillbilly girl friend of yours in charge alone anymore, I'm going to tell her to train you to be a manager. And you're going to work with her from now on, 'cause I know you stoners don't have the nerves not to snitch on each other.'

'You're making me a manager?' said Davy. Now usually Coria was a good judge of character, but Susanna was a hard read, and he regretted making her a manager. Coria was hesitant to fire her 'cause he needed everyone he could get, and he couldn't demote her, without firing her or making her quit, and she really didn't steal that much. He also noticed a change in Davy, and was pretty sure that even though he was Susanna's boyfriend he'd discourage her from stealing. In the ways she was bad, he was good and the ways she was good he was bad.

The next night Susanna and Davy were in charge and they were looking at the roster.

'Oh no, Javier is working tonight,' said Davy.

'What wrong with that?' said Susanna.

'He never does what I tell him,' said Davy.

'That's 'cause you micro-manage him, dude,' said Susanna. 'Just give him a general job and leave him alone. You do that, he's a good worker.'

'Plus we got Florent,' said Davy. 'He's one of the laziest guys I've met.'

'He's better than no one,' said Susanna. 'We're better with him than without him. Besides, maybe he's not lazy, maybe he's saving all his energy for something else. It's his right to live the way he wants, isn't it? As long as he does his job, more or less. For all we know, if we ever saw his apartment we might find plans for the next new floppy disk. You should listen to him talk about computers.'

'You're just making excuses,' said Davy.

'No, I'm looking for the good,' said Susanna, 'and we should be glad we have the luxury to do that.'

From that day forward Susanna and Davy almost always worked together, and believe it or not, it made them work better. And they needed it 'cause like I said before, that place was busy. In fact Coria called the Morgans' house almost every day for Leroy to either come into work early or work on his days off. Coria never called for Susanna to come in; in fact, he once called her to get Davy's phone number. Davy was drunk that night, but Coria was so desperate he didn't care.

Like I said Coria was calling for Leroy every day of the week, until one day Leroy had had it.

'I'm sorry, I can't come in today, Mr. Coria,' said Leroy.

'What the hell!' yelled Coria. 'You going to a hoedown or a cousin raping?'

'Sorry Mr. Coria,' said Leroy.

For Leroy's whole life he had never turned down work; he had never had the opportunity. What work he had, he thanked God for, and what little pay he got, he thanked God for that, too. But now he was making more money than he ever had, and he thought maybe he could take a little more time for school, for his family and friends, or maybe more time to stare at the wall. Why should anyone care how he spent his time?

That night Leroy felt guilty and scared and he started to wonder if he made a mistake, and he started to wonder if he still had a job. But the next day Leroy walked into work and Coria was his same old grouchy self, and put Leroy to work. Leroy had been fired from most of his other jobs for less reason than refusing to come when called. A lot of times bosses would just fire him 'cause they just didn't like the looks of him. But as I said, Coria's store was so busy he needed everyone he could get, whether they were lazy, stupid, or God forbid, wanted to be treated like a human being. In a lot of ways Coria didn't like Leroy, and in a different timeline they never got to know each other, but in this world these two very different people had to mix.

One day Queen Cali was so busy that they actually ran out of burgers. Leroy put a piece of paper on the front door that read,

‘SORRY OUT
OF BURGERS.’

Davy called up Coria on the phone to tell him the news.

‘Speak,’ said Coria.

‘Mr. Coria, we’re out of meat,’ said Davy.

‘What meat?’ said Coria.

“‘What meat?’ Oh, the grain fed veal,’ said Davy. ‘What the hell do you think? The burgers, man. Dude, the only meat left in that freezer is Mickey’s dead nephew.’

‘You stupid dog roaster!’ yelled Coria. ‘What the hell did you do?’

‘What the hell do you think?’ said Davy. ‘We sold them all. There’s people here like ants on a God damn dog turd, dude. You should have ordered more.’

‘Why did you wait till the shit hit the fan to call me!? You rice eating, gold fish tending, worm farming, noodle slurping...’ Davy hung up. He didn’t have the patience for Coria’s ... bullshit.

Coria didn’t seem to notice Davy hung up ‘cause he was yelling so loud, and he hung up right after. Coria grabbed his keys and ran out his door to his car.

‘Come on baby,’ said Coria, ‘we got a mission tonight.’

Coria drove all the way to a wholesaler and back to the store in less than an hour, and as he approached the store the phone rang. Davy picked it up.

‘Hey, karate kid,’ said Coria on the phone, ‘grab your other brother Darryl and run out the front door. Right now!’

Davy and Leroy ran outside just in time to see Jesus Coria screech to a halt sideways in his Ferrari Testarossa. Coria put down his big cell phone and stepped out of the car.

‘Heads up, losers!’ yelled Coria as he used his big arms and tossed two gigantic boxes full of meat at the two boys nearly knocking them down. They didn’t think about it then, but they would later talk about Coria’s remarkable strength. ‘Now get the hell back to work.’

‘Mr. Coria!’ yelled Davy, ‘you’re a bean farming, donkey riding taco vendor!’

‘What!?’ yelled Coria.

‘Yeah!’ yelled Leroy. ‘You’re a...’

‘Leroy, I will kill you,’ said Coria. Leroy was threatened a lot by Coria but this time he believed his boss more than any other, and then Leroy remembered what his father always told him, life isn’t fair.

‘You’re a stupid head,’ said Leroy.

Coria got in his fancy car and peeled away like he was delivering a pizza. Coria was making so much money that he finally got the car he always

wanted. The only time those boys ever saw Coria smile for real was in that car. He drove up and down the freeway in that thing so fast that he got pulled over twice in one month once, but he just paid the tickets like it was the cost of doing business.

One time Coria pulled up in his car and the boys noticed a woman and a toddler get out and stand next to it, waiting for him. The woman was as short as an OompaLoompa, almost as short as the toddler in her arms. The boys never thought of Coria as a family man, and even if he was they wouldn't think he'd use a Ferrari Testarossa as a family car, but like the Morgans he wasn't exactly sure how to be middle class. In fact, the way Coria felt about his car reminded Leroy of the way his mother felt about her outfits, and it made Leroy smile.

There was one day Davy and the Morgans heard that the minimum wage had been raised. They soon found it ironic 'cause they already made more than that--hell, they made more than what they raised it to. Coria had to pay them that much 'cause he knew they could get a job at Woolworth's or whatever by just walking through the door. In fact, in Los Fronteriza there must have been a couple hundred jobs for every able bodied man and woman. It's a lot better than the other way, they thought. The only person the kids knew that even actually made minimum wage was the old man that ripped the tickets at the movie theater, and Susanna always snuck by him anyway.

Coria made his employees work hard and frankly he talked to them like crap, but he treated them like kings compared to some of their customers. Most of the customers were nice and the ones that were rude the workers figured they probably had a bad day. But there were some customers that must have thought there were monkeys working at that place. Soulless monkeys that were bottomless black holes you could throw any insult or indignity down you could think of, with no fear of reprisal.

One day Davy was working the drive-through and while he was taking the order of the man at the order box, the man at the window banged on the window.

'How the hell long is this going to take, you loser!' the asshole yelled. 'How long does it take you stoner, waste of skins to make four burgers?'

Davy grabbed the man's unfinished food and put it in a bag.

'Pretty damn long,' said Davy. He acted like he was going to hand that asshole his food but he dropped it on the ground next to his car, and slammed the window. That asshole later called to complain but like I said, Coria needed all the people he could get, and in his experience most complaints were crap, and as long as the money was rolling in he didn't care. If that money wasn't rolling in he might have been looking for an excuse to fire someone and Davy would have caught his attention. But that money was rolling in and Davy was safe.

‘That guy was lucky I wasn’t there,’ said Susanna.

Chapter 27

One day when Clark was driving home he saw something running across the road and almost instinctively he sped up and swerved, running it over. Clark pulled over and walked out to the middle of the road and grabbed the dead rabbit and threw it in his trunk.

That night the Morgans skinned the rabbit and roasted it in the oven. This was one of the things the Morgans often did when they were poor. The kids, especially the older ones, remembered when one of their parents would come home with a rabbit, or a snake or a turkey or a possum they ran over, and it was like a surprise holiday. A lot of people may think it weird, but the Morgan children would leap at the opportunity to devour every morsel of meat they could get. There were times they practically lived off bread 'cause bread was cheap. They give bread to ducks, but meat was something human beings ate. Even if it was overcooked old slabs of beef that Sharon rescued at her restaurant job before they were thrown away, the children loved it. They had to boil those old slabs of beef like they were shoe leather, just so they could eat it without wearing out those jaw muscles. But they ate that meat and they were human again.

Clark and Sharon put that roast rabbit on their table and thought back on their lives only a year ago, only five years ago, only decades ago.

All of their lives, from the time they were children, Clark and Sharon spent half of their lives working like dogs and the other half working like dogs to find work.

They met in their mid-teens in a line trying vainly to get a job at one of the oil companies in Oilville. Back then Clark combed his blond hair straight back and had frizzy sideburns that almost went down to his chin. Clark was standing, solemn and brooding as he usually was, when he heard singing behind him.

'Be like Indian keep your head say this Indian word instead, Cowabonga.'

Clark looked back at the dark haired little girl in a tattered dress behind him singing, and reading an issue of, Uncle Scrooge. In many ways she was plain, like a shorter version of Olive Oyl. The only thing striking about her was the contrast between her pale skin and her black hair, and when the light hit her hair just right it seemed to shimmer with strange colors like the black wing of a crow.

'Where the hell did you hear that ridiculous song?' asked Clark.

'TV,' said Sharon.

'What?' said Clark.

'Television,' said Sharon.

'You must be rich,' said Clark, mockingly.

'Oh my family doesn't have a television,' said Sharon, 'we don't even have electricity. We saw it in a store in San Dimas and I watched it for hours,'

she giggled, 'then that big meanie threw me out! He said I was just a looky-loo. But I don't know why, 'cause he told this other family that someday everyone was going to have a TV.'

'That's never going to happen,' said Clark. 'Those things aren't like radios, the signal can't go that far. Even if a couple of us get those things, they need to put up an antenna in the town, to make them work, assuming you have electricity. They're never going to put something like that in a town like this.' Clark's face grew grim and he expected the girl to either join his sadness or be repelled by it, but she did neither.

'Be like Indian keep your head say this Indian word instead, Cowabonga!' sang Sharon. 'You should say it, it'll make you smile. Cowabonga!'

And Clark smiled, and he hadn't smiled for a long time.

The next day Clark went to see Sharon and she led him down to a nearby farm, where she started to blow her breath on random chickens like they were birthday candles.

'You know what's great about chickens?' she said. 'When you blow on them they don't know it's air. They think there's a bug on them. They never figure it out. They fall for it every time.'

Clark watched her blow air on every chicken and those birds pecked on their bodies like they thought something was on them.

Later they went into town and Clark followed Sharon as she found weird looking people and decided to follow them around in case they did something funny.

Sometimes they'd ride in Clark's Terraplane--that is, when it ran. One time it was broken down but they had their minds so made up that they had to go to the drive-in they pushed the damn thing in.

'Century 21 calling, Century 21 calling,' said one commercial on the drive-in screen. 'I'm glad to tell you about the electronic telephone switching system of tomorrow. The electronic central office will be made possible by the magic of the transistor. Imagine an electronic brain. Not just carrying out commands but remembering them for hours, days and even years at a time. I say brain because the central office will almost think for itself.'

'Clark, you really think they'll have an electronic brain in the future?' said Sharon.

'Maybe,' said Clark, 'but how could it ever affect people like us?'

'It could answer your telephone,' said Sharon. 'Weren't you listening?'

Clark smiled and put his arm around her.

A lot of times they just walked to the river and Clark would fish and Sharon would go with him so they could be alone together. As the sun would

set they'd light a fire and Sharon would always lie between the fire and Clark, so Clark could look at the firelight dance on her skin.

'Clark,' said Sharon in her lilting voice, 'why do you like me so much?'

'You make me happy,' said Clark.

'It's good you know,' said Sharon, 'it's good to be happy.'

What Clark saw in Sharon was a person that wasn't afraid to have fun, to seek pleasure and want happiness. After all, what's the point of chasing that carrot on a stick if you don't get a bite every once in a while?

There were other girls that liked Clark, some prettier and smarter than Sharon, but Sharon made Clark smile and laugh like no other person had done. There are some that say "they make me laugh" is not a real foundation for love, but for some, laughter is more precious than gold. And Clark and Sharon loved each other more than gold and almost more than any other couple in Oilville.

Once they spent a night in a barn, and Sharon put some straw down her blouse and started singing like Marilyn Monroe. It made Clark laugh his ass off.

As it got dark there was one high window open and it shot a shaft of moonlight down like a spotlight. Clark had Sharon stand in that light just so he could look at her. He held her from behind and kissed her.

'Sharon, I want you to marry me,' said Clark. 'I want you to have my children.'

'Maybe that's just barn talk,' said Sharon. 'How can I know it's true?'

'I don't know,' said Clark, 'but I'll ask you every night for the rest of our lives if that's what it takes. I'd rather be alone than with someone else.'

There were those who said that Clark and Sharon never should have had one child, let alone five. Maybe it was love that made them start a family or maybe it was a mix of stubbornness and stupidity. But maybe it was the love they had not just for each other but for their parents and their family. They just couldn't let their family die, and they loved their family.

They lived with their parents, they lived in other people's houses, they lived in their car, and they slept under bridges in boxcars and in barns. Clark worked odd jobs, some legal and some not. He even ended up digging ditches for wires to put electricity in homes that never had it before.

After his first child Clark was talked into joining the Army and then talked into going to war. Clark's parents practically disowned him. They thought he was a fool for abandoning his family to die on the other side of the world. But Clark thought the odds weren't so dire. He was good with a gun, and unlike some other soldiers might say, the money was better than he had ever had.

Sharon supported Clark; she supported everything Clark did but she couldn't deny the heartbreak every time she woke up and her true love

wasn't lying there, but maybe lying in a pool of blood in a savage land. She waited till the end of the day to look at the mail, 'cause she couldn't bear to read the horrific news while it was too early for her to drink herself to sleep. She never talked to anyone about the war, or watched anything about it on the television or listened to any of it on the radio, because it all seemed like bad news to her, and she couldn't stand to hear it.

When Clark came home it was a fairy tale come true, and a miracle that she hadn't dared to pray for, but their troubles were far from over.

Clark often woke up in the middle of the night crying like a child. Sharon would grab him and speak in his ear. She said the same basic thing every time, but every time she seemed to refine it, like a chef refining a recipe.

'It's over, it's over, long over,' said Sharon. 'You can't change the past, you just need to be glad that it's over. So you were weaker than you wanted; all men are weak beyond a point, a point they never choose, a point that's not their fault. It's not wrong that you're alive. Your life helps people, it doesn't hurt them. I know it helps people because it helps me.

'And yes, the world is dark now but it wasn't always that way, and it won't be forever. You need to fight all the while 'cause when the dawn comes you'll meet it stronger than you would have, and it will be brighter than it would have.'

As alive as Clark was, he was still poor. The oil company that Clark's father worked for was slowly but surely winding down. They said what oil was left in the field wasn't worth the money they'd spend to get it out of the ground. They weren't hiring anyone. Clark found it even harder to find a job than before he served and what money he did make didn't go as far.

And yes, many said Clark and Sharon didn't have the right to have the children they did. But they were human beings in love in the land of the free, and they thought no one had the right to tell them how to live their lives. Plus every child they had was them shaking their fist at the world that wanted them to go silently into the night. The Morgans were going to fight. After all, what is the surplus population anyway, and who could we ever trust to decide.

The closest thing they could afford to a real home was a one bedroom trailer in a park that half looked like a junk yard. People there didn't throw things away; they were too scared to, and the Morgans soon picked up the habit, too. About every year the water would go out for almost a month, and the first day or two when it came back on it didn't look that friendly. And about every month the power would go out for days. It might have been better when it did, 'cause if they weren't careful the power bill was almost higher than the rent. A lot of the things the land lord did were probably illegal, like running that place without water or power, but the

Morgans never complained to or about him, 'cause they were afraid of being thrown out on the street.

Most of their lives the Morgans went back and forth between welfare and working all day and all night. They switched back and forth so much 'cause neither situation worked. When they worked they made more money, but they were exhausted and neglected their family horribly, and they eventually got fired or laid off anyway. When they went on welfare they had time but the money wasn't nearly enough. Clark even wondered if his landlord and the welfare office had a deal going, 'cause every time the welfare went up so did his rent. So sooner or later, they went back to work, when they could, and the welfare ended.

One day someone called the Morgans' trailer and only the kids picked up the phone, because the parents were out working. The busybody figured out that there were kids alone there and called the police. Clark and Sharon returned to find a cop at their home saying that they couldn't leave those kids alone, or they would be taken away. Incidents like this made Clark and Sharon sit their kids down and tell them that they had to be careful what they told their teachers, or what they told the police, or what they told strangers, or they could be taken away.

One day they got a letter from school saying Enos was malnourished, saying he was dirty, saying his clothes were tattered, and they threatened to take him away. The Morgans focused their money on the boy, determined that the state wouldn't steal their son.

One of Clark and Sharon's only escapes was the television, the thing Sharon was right about. One of their favorite shows was Good Times. There weren't many things that the Morgans could identify with on that show, but the few that they did, were profound.

Almost every day the youngest child, at the time, would come home filled with envy over some toy or gadget one of their classmates had. They'd beg for one themselves, appealing to fairness. Clark would sit them down and tell them one of the most profound truths that he could fit his head around, 'Life isn't fair.'

There were times that Clark Morgan looked at his life and he didn't just feel poor, he felt oppressed.

One of the few lights in Clark's life was his faith. And Clark had his doubts; if you think he didn't, you're wrong. But there were days he looked at the sky and the rocks and the wind and the mountains and sunbeams coming down from heaven and he recognized they were alive, and a mind directed them. And that mind directed Clark Morgan to carry on, no matter what happened.

The Morgans cut and ripped apart the rabbit like lions with a zebra.

'If we met today, would you want me still?' said Sharon, interrupting Clark before he took a bite. 'What have I to offer?'

Clark smiled 'cause he'd been waiting for her to ask him this for some time. 'Don't you dare underestimate yourself. Loyalty and the love of happiness are rare, too rare. And how can you be so sure you didn't help make my success, how can you be sure I'd be the man I am without you? I'm not sure; in fact, I'm certain the other way.'

'Hey Enos,' said Susanna glaring across the dinner table, 'I dare you to eat one of the eyes.'

Enos looked at the rabbit lying on the table.

'Darers do first,' said Enos.

'You are such a dork, dude,' said Susanna.

'Look you two dinks,' said Sharon, 'there are two eyes! You can each eat one.'

Susanna and Enos stared at each other. They each reached out in unison with their forks and plucked the eyes out of the creature and put its eyes in their mouths, and they chewed.

'Well,' said Clark, 'how does it taste?'

'Like bad eggs,' said Susanna.

'Burnt bacon,' said Enos.

'Bacon and eggs,' said Clark, 'now we're having breakfast for dinner.'

'Remember that possum we got one time?' said Calvin.

'I like possum even better than rabbit,' said Leroy.

'You know,' said Susanna, 'possums aren't native to the west coast. Most were introduced here in the 30s.'

'That recent?' said Clark. 'They're kind of like us.'

'That's not completely true, Susanna,' said Enos, 'opossums used to live here in prehistoric times, they just went extinct with the dinosaurs and survived on the east coast.'

'Nobody cares about that,' said Susanna.

'Nobody cares about any of the crap you guys talk about,' said Calvin.

'Shut up, Calvin,' said Susanna and Enos together.

'I'm going to change the subject,' said Clark. 'Danny, what the hell is on your mind?'

'Jesus,' said Danny. Everyone settled down with the mention of their God.

'What about Jesus?' said Clark.

'I remember a long time ago, when you and Mom were sad that you didn't have enough money,' said Danny, 'and I would pray to Jesus to give us money. And I would wake up and look around the trailer and there wasn't any. I didn't know why Jesus didn't give us money, but now I think I do.'

The Morgans all looked at the youngest dying to know what he would say next. Danny left heaven the soonest so they couldn't help but feel curious.

'One time Zodac told He-Man that he couldn't help him that much,' said Danny, 'if Zodac helped He-Man too much he would change the universe too much, and take away He-Man's freedom. So he couldn't always help him. I think Zodac is like Jesus.'

All the Morgans smiled.

'You got all that from a God damn cartoon kid?' said Clark.

'Heavens to Murgatroid, it's not just a cartoon,' said Danny, 'it's He-Man.'

Clark put his hand on his youngest son's head, and his eyes watered.

'At least I think he didn't give us that money. I never checked in the cupboard over the stove,' said Danny.

Chapter 28

One day Enos, Roni and Steven came home and they set a board game up on the table, and Enos made Leroy come and help them. Susanna and Davy looked on from the couch.

'God, this game is stupid,' said Enos.

'I don't understand it,' said Roni.

'If anything it's too simple,' said Enos. 'See, look, you just roll the dice and add that to your respective specs and interpret the difference between that number and your enemies' or whatever task you're doing.'

Enos rolled the dice, and Steven studied it, then studied a chart. 'OK, move your guy over here,' said Steven. Enos moved his game piece from one part of a hand drawn map to another. 'OK you survived the poison from the zombie lobster,' continued Steven. 'Now you have to face the alien ghost Sphinx.'

Enos. 'What I hate is, it's based too much on chance. Chess is better,' said

'Now you have to ask a riddle,' said Steven to Leroy.

'What, where are they written?' said Leroy, looking through a book.

'You were supposed to make one before,' said Enos. 'We'll just use the dice. What are the stats for rolling the dice for a riddle?'

'I can't find it,' said Leroy.

'We don't have anything ready,' said Steven. 'You should just make a riddle up. Besides Enos, you said the game uses chance too much anyway.'

'Make up a riddle?' said Leroy.

'That sounds fun,' said Roni.

'He's not going to come up with a riddle,' said Enos. 'Why did you put him in charge? He doesn't know what he's doing. He keeps picking the stupidest monsters--I mean, a robot cave man? A vampire unicorn? And the story--why would an evil wizard want to outlaw dancing? Why can't we just fight a dragon or something?'

'Uh... I can't find that in the book,' said Leroy.

'Why can't you be in charge?' said Enos to Steven.

'I don't want to be the DM, I just want to play,' said Steven.

'Just make up a riddle,' said Enos, to Leroy. Leroy sat back and thought.

'I don't understand how people can spend so much time playing a game like that,' said Davy.

'I played it once with these guys after school,' said Susanna. 'It was weird. I was like a superpowered elf girl, the most powerful character, and I had to fight most of big monsters. In the game they started to depend on me, but what surprised me was they started treating me different in real life, depending on me more. Like they confused the game with reality.'

'That is weird,' said Davy. 'Maybe they should start playing games like that at the UN.'

'I got one,' said Leroy, sitting up.

'This is going to be good,' said Susanna to Davy.

'What is a hard question, but is also hard to answer?' said Leroy.

'Wait... what?' said Steven.

'I know the answer,' said Susanna. 'Who's an idiot but also a nimrod?'

'Shut up, Susanna,' yelled Enos.

'Enos, don't get upset,' said Roni, 'you could have a heart attack.'

'Damn it,' said Enos, 'I need to at least be thirty or something before I get a heart attack. I wish you'd stop talking about that.'

'No, I mean in the game,' said Roni. 'Remember, your brother gave your character high blood pressure.'

Susanna laughed about the minor squabble that was in front of her 'cause she was worried about the great one that was about to happen outside. Susanna saw her mother looking out the window. Outside was her father, waiting on the couch. He was waiting to give his firstborn son a piece of his mind. Susanna grabbed her boyfriend's hand as she saw a figure through the window walk down the street and sit next to her father.

'I opened a letter from the college,' said Clark.

'That's addressed to me,' said Calvin, 'why the hell did you open it?'

'Cause you don't have the courage to tell me yourself,' said Clark, 'it says you haven't even registered for next quarter.'

'Dad,' said Calvin, 'I'm sorry.'

'This is unacceptable, Calvin,' said Clark.

'Dad, I just keep failing the same classes again and again and again,' said Calvin. 'I just can't take it anymore.'

'You're too proud. You need to fight that, son,' said Clark. 'You'll take them again, a thousand times if that's what it takes. Maybe you should quit that new job you have.'

'Dad, I'm not like you,' said Calvin. 'I'm not some kind of genius.'

'You don't have to be a genius,' said Clark, starting to yell, 'you have to be a man! You have to get your head out of your ass and put in the hard work. It's worth it. Even if it's not computers, there's power plants, factories, engineering, mining. Son, if you know enough math and science, you will never be poor, ever.'

'I can't do it, Dad,' said Calvin.

'You'll do it!' said Clark. 'You're my son and you'll do what I tell you to do!'

'Dad, when I was in boot camp, I was scared to death that I would washout,' said Calvin. 'I saw guys washout and thought whatever I had to do, I wasn't going to be like them, 'cause as far as I was concerned they were failures; they were practically dead. But when I got a job working on those roads, I met a guy that washedout, and he was in the same place I was. I don't think failure is a bad thing anymore, I think it's just a sign that you're meant for something else.'

'Calvin, if you don't have an education in this world, you aren't worth your weight in crap!' said Clark, 'you're going to reenroll, if only because you live in my house!'

'Dad, I don't have to live here anymore,' said Calvin. He handed his father an envelope. Clark opened it.

'What is this?' said Clark.

'That's my first check,' said Calvin, as his father opened it.

'This can't be possible,' said Clark. Clark was in shock.

'It's possible, Dad,' said Calvin. 'This job is a dream. All I do is work a jackhammer all day and sometimes a shovel. And show off my muscles to the high school girls that pass by. And the pay, Dad, is awesome. Everyone always says construction is hard, but I don't think it's that bad at all.'

'You swear on your life this check is real?' asked Clark. This discussion was going in a strange direction that Clark didn't expect at all. It was a direction that was so good that Clark couldn't believe it, he couldn't trust it, but it was happening anyway.

'It's real, Dad,' said Calvin.

'How can you make this much money working on a road?' said Clark.

'I don't know, Dad, but it's excellent,' said Calvin. 'Dad, I think I'm going to move out.'

'Calvin, that's good pay, but I still want you to stay in school,' said Clark.

'Dad, I don't have to, I don't even have to live here anymore,' said Calvin.

'Calvin... Boy, I'm asking you. I'm not telling you, I'm asking you,' said Clark.

Calvin had never heard something like that from his father before. Calvin had been through a lot of hardships many men hadn't and achieved a lot of things other men hadn't, but when his father started to ask him to do something instead of ordering him, he realized he was an adult. He thought he was an adult already, but he wasn't until now, and he smiled.

'I think I'll... I'll think about it, Dad,' said Calvin. They both felt relieved yet uncomfortable, until they hugged and everything seemed right. Calvin got up and walked indoors. Sharon cautiously came outside minutes after.

'How did it go?' said Sharon.

'Weird,' said Clark, as he stood up, 'but I think I got him to stay in school.'

'Oh thank God,' said Sharon.

'But I think he wants to move out,' said Clark.

'Oh my God,' said Sharon.

'Look at the check he got,' said Clark, showing her the piece of paper.

'God,' said Sharon.

'I think the world's changing,' said Clark. 'Maybe the world is getting better. I hope it is.'

Clark embraced his wife.

'We only got four now,' said Clark.

Calvin lay in his bed looking up at the ceiling. He looked over at his doorway and saw Susanna. He walked over to his sister and hugged her.

Chapter 29

Now for the most part Clark liked western novels, and after getting bored halfway through the one he was rereading he decided to look for some new ones. On the way home from work one day he drove by the bookstore but it looked so crowded he decided to go to the smaller one down the street.

Clark entered the store. It was about half filled with people and the shelves were about half filled with books. Two 40-something year old women were standing at the front desk. It had a cash register from the sixties, it looked like. One of those women was furiously filling out forms and the other was desperately trying to keep a conversation with her. Clark got the sense that they used to have discussions that weren't so interrupted by work in past.

Clark kneeled down to look at the books at the bottom of a shelf and he couldn't help but overhear the women.

'Look at that. They're building another store across the street. You used to just be able to see across that field for miles and now it's just filled with buildings,' said one.

'I know,' said the other.

'It's so disorganized. How many stores does a city need--like that book store down the street. Why should a town have more than one store that sells the same thing? It's not fair.'

'It's not fair but it doesn't seem to be hurting me at all either.'

'They're not even a real book store. They make most of their money off comic books and guides to those games.'

'Yeah but they sell more classics than I do, and I'm selling more books now than I ever have.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'But it's true. When I bought this store I just did it to be noble, to provide a public service. But now I'm actually making a profit. My father sent me a check the other day but I called him to say I wasn't going to cash it, I told him I didn't need it, and then he said he was proud of me.'

'It's not about the money. People build those stores to make money and then they just pay immigrants next to nothing.'

'Yeah, but I was just talking to this one guy the other day that moved here from Tanzania just a couple months ago, that works at one of those stores. And he makes more money than you do.'

'Are you sure that's right?'

'That's what he said.'

'Those countries are poor because they're over populated.'

'This city has doubled in population in the last five years and instead of getting poorer we're getting richer all the time.'

'I don't even understand where any of this money is coming from. This country must be stealing it somehow; they're just not reporting it on the

news. That's what all those wars are about, profiteering, they just keep it a secret. It's greed that causes war.'

'I always knew war was bad, but I thought I had to sacrifice to stop it. But maybe it's the other way around. Maybe war was why we were sacrificing? Maybe war was 'causing poverty and poverty was 'causing war? Maybe we were poor because we wouldn't work together.'

'Two people can't just trade with each other and end up helping each other, it's impossible. They can't both get richer. There's a limited amount of resources, money and jobs.'

'Are there always limits? Don't all rules have exceptions? Isn't the point of technology to find exceptions and use them? Ancient people thought lightning was the wrath of the gods, but with the advent of electricity we turned that wrath into a gift--we found a new resource. What if technology can give us resources we haven't even thought of before? What if... what if there's enough for everyone, enough for their children and their children's children? Wouldn't it be wrong for us not to try and use it?'

'Wealth can't be made. It can only move around. And it can only move if people steal it.'

'If one person has an excess of one resource and another has an excess of another resource, why can't they trade and end up richer. I mean... am I stealing it? I don't hurt anyone, I don't lie to anyone. I used to just get college students that just bought books their professors told them to buy.'

'God only knows how many classics would have failed if they weren't supported by schools.'

'But now everyone's buying them. Now I can't keep the shelves stocked. I used to think it was a shame people were buying books 'cause they were just told to, but now they're doing it 'cause they actually want them. I think it's 'cause they can afford them now, and they can afford to take the time to read them. Should I really be sad about that? I don't know.' She sighed, 'You won't believe what happened yesterday.'

'What?'

'My girlfriend was here and she kissed me just as a bunch of nuns came through the front door.'

'What happened?'

'They just grabbed the books they wanted, paid for them and left. I never saw anything like it. They think I'm going to hell and they gave me money and thanked me for the pleasure. And I gave them books and I thanked them for the pleasure. It's like everyone's hatred is just being rendered moot. Whatever judgments people have, they just talk about them and that's all, take it or leave it. People are using words, not force. It's so weird. My girlfriend and I have been making so much money recently that we've even talked about adopting a child. It'll be hard, but I never thought I could afford to support a child.'

'People think someone made this but they're wrong, it's just a fluke. People can't even control their own lives like that; how could they make things better like this? It'll be 1929 again soon enough, just wait.'

'Maybe if things were different I wouldn't have been poor. Maybe no one has to be poor, maybe no one should be. It's just that I used to think there was a nobility to being poor, but now I think I didn't know what was possible. Maybe poverty was something that was forced on me, it was stopping me, oppressed me. Forcing me not to use my potential, to... to make me neglect my humanity. No one should be forced to be poor.'

'But this isn't the way it was supposed to happen, this isn't what we imagined? Results aren't everything; it has to happen for the right reason. It has to be designed, it can't just happen.'

'Jaws didn't evolve intending to be jaws. Jaws evolved from gills.'

'Wouldn't it be better for some of these people if they didn't need jobs, if they were just given the money?'

'Charity is vital. But usually most people would be better off if we could find them a job.'

'But a lot of those jobs are so terrible.'

'The best solution to bad jobs is more jobs. We need hundreds, maybe thousands, of jobs for every one person. We can't have natural selection if there's no diversity to choose from. I've been thinking about hiring someone, now that I can afford it. If I do, then it can help my store grow bigger, and if my store grows bigger I can hire another person, and then my store will grow even bigger, and I can hire another person. If we all can just keep up that trend, till we reach every corner of the earth, till we reach every human being, we can finally end it.'

'End what?'

'Poverty.'

'That can't be possible, I gave up on that a long time ago. Maybe it's better that way, maybe some people are just beyond hope. Maybe some people are better being poor, having limits, and better being controlled. Maybe they wouldn't know what to do with money if they had it.'

'No, no one should be controlled, we can't think like that.'

'Then how is it supposed to work?'

'I think one problem is that those Wall Street guys make it sound so complicated. Maybe they do it on purpose, I don't know. The point is, it's all very simple. An economy is just a bunch of people helping each other, and to keep track of it, there's a point system--a point system that isn't run by any authority but run by the people that are actually helping each other. It's not just about the points. Jobs just can't be busy jobs. They need to make someone's life better. Jobs that don't help anyone, don't help anyone. And the best people to decide if the jobs are helping anyone, are the people they're helping.'

'Don't tell me you're gonna say greed is good. We should want something better than the material world.'

'If greed is wanting something beyond your capacity, to the point that it hurts people or yourself, then isn't the want of the unobtainable at the expense of the obtainable the ultimate and most destructive of all greed? It's just every time something happens, like with those nuns, it keeps making me think of that old quote, "Nothing human disgusts me." Maybe not even the material part of the human.' She paused, 'Besides, comic books aren't all bad. This kid was in here yesterday and he showed me this comic where Batman and Superman fought at the end, and it was one of the most intelligent things I'd ever read.'

Clark found a book he wanted and went to the front desk. And the woman rang him up on that old register from the sixties. Clark noticed the order forms she was filling out by hand.

'Have you ever considered getting a computerized register?' said Clark.

The woman smiled. 'Maybe,' she said.

Clark got in his car and before he started it he started to laugh, he thought of that woman. 'Cause he knew for all their differences, he knew both their minds were changed.

Clark went back there one day and found she still had that old register, but it was just for show now. She rang up his purchase on a computerized register and she was filling out her order forms on a computer too.

She gestured to the computer. 'Is that where it's coming from?' she asked.

'At least some of it, I think, yes,' said Clark smiling.

Chapter 30

One day Enos, Steven and Roni decided to stop at the grocery store on the way back from school, and they were arguing all the way.

'It's not going to work,' said Enos.

'But everyone says it does,' said Steven.

'Well we'll see,' said Roni.

The three kids went up to one of the registers and put a box of Alka-seltzers on the conveyer belt along with two loaves of bread.

The clerk grabbed the items and looked at the three.

'How can you kids do something that cruel?' said clerk one.

'What they doing?' said clerk two, at another register.

'They're doing the Alka-seltzer bird thing,' said clerk one.

'Awesome dude,' said clerk two.

'It's not awesome,' said clerk one, 'it's really immature to kill animals for no reason.'

'Are the birds really going to die if they explode?' said Steven.

'No,' said Enos, 'cause it doesn't work.'

'Taylor said it worked,' said Roni.

'Taylor's an idiot,' said Enos.

'Hey kid,' said clerk two, 'my friend Mitch did it, and it totally works.'

'Did you see him do it?' said Enos.

'Well no,' said clerk two, 'but Mitch wouldn't lie to us.'

'Yeah dude,' said clerk one, 'Mitch wouldn't lie, he's Kool.'

'Calvin said it would work,' said Roni.

'Well now I know it definitely doesn't work,' said Enos. 'Just think about it, why would God make an animal so stupid that it could actually be blown to hell by an over the counter drug? And even if he did, they'd all be dead by now.'

'But they can't burp?' said Steven.

'So,' said Enos, 'even if that's true, they could just throw it up.'

'How do you know birds can throw up?' said Steven.

'How do you think they feed baby birds?' said Enos.

'Let's go test it,' said clerk one.

'Hey, you said it was immature,' said clerk two.

'Yeah but I'm not going to let someone call Mitch a liar,' said clerk one.

Well soon, out of some weird misplaced pride and a morbid curiosity, all five of them walked out the back of the store to try and test the urban myth.

It took only throwing a slice of bread up in the air for about five seagulls to land on the pavement and start pecking each other out of selfish cruelty.

Enos and Steven started folding the Alka-seltzers up in the bread and threw them out at the birds. The gulls gulped them down left and right and Steven and Enos worked fast to keep up with them.

After every Alka-seltzer everyone watched the bird that ate it, almost willing it to go up like the Death Star, but it just didn't seem to happen.

'See that one, it ate the most,' said clerk one.

'What about that one?' said clerk two.

'That one's ate hardly any,' said clerk one. 'Hey kid, you need to try and feed just one bird; you're getting them all mixed up.'

'I'm doing it,' said Enos.

'They all look alike,' said Steven.

'Here give it to me,' said clerk one as he took the bread and tablets away from Enos.

'Whatever,' said Enos.

Soon the tablets were gone. They went through about twenty of them and the two clerks decided to go back in the store to get another loaf of bread to keep the birds there.

'It usually takes an hour or so for it to start to work,' said clerk one.

So they waited almost an hour. But all the birds miraculously survived and flew back to do whatever the hell they did.

'We got them mixed up,' said clerk one. 'If we fed all the pills to one bird and waited longer it would work.'

The clerks walked back in the store and gave their boss some excuses about where they'd been. Enos, Roni, and Steven started to walk to Steven's house.

'Maybe it would happen if we got the birds to stay longer,' said Steven.

'Are you crazy?' said Enos. 'It doesn't work; we just saw right in front of us that it doesn't work.'

'Yeah, but would Taylor lie?' said Steven.

'Yes, he lied,' said Enos.

'But everyone says it works,' said Steven.

'Look Steven, we did all we could,' said Roni, 'and it didn't work.'

'Thank you,' said Enos.

'But it might work sometimes,' said Roni.

Enos rolled his eyes.

Later Enos went home. While watching TV that night, there was a time when Enos was alone with Susanna.

'Susanna?' said Enos.

'What loser?' said his sister.

'You know that Alka-seltzer bird thing?' said Enos.

'What about it?' said Susanna.

'I tried it,' Susanna looked at him. He could almost sense she was testing him. 'It didn't work,' continued Enos. 'Susanna, I don't think it's ever worked. I think it's a myth.'

'I tried it too once,' said Susanna. 'I know.'

'But Susanna, everyone says it does,' said Enos, 'even Steven. And Roni even said that maybe it works sometimes, when they saw right in front of them that it doesn't work. And those guys at the store were the same way.'

'Strange creatures we live with, huh?' said Susanna.

'But how can they doubt something they saw with their own two eyes,' said Enos, 'because of something their friends said?' If you can't tell, the phenomenon Enos just experienced scared the hell out of him.

'I'm not sure,' said Susanna. 'I think for some people, probably most, socializing is more important than the truth. They like the concept of believing people won't lie to them and telling people what they want to hear.'

'But why?' said Enos.

'It might be some kind of a tag or a display,' said Susanna, 'like two bird species that look similar but have different colors and songs. Or the different flags for different countries. Only some people use different concepts to show what groups they belong to.'

'Sometimes I think it's corrupted everything from science to art to politics to religion to religions that some people don't like to call religions. Things like science, art, politics, and religion should be made to help people, not to lie to them. Sometimes I think it's harmless, but sometimes I think it's killed billions of people.'

'Some people will just keep doing the same thing over and over again hoping it'll work next time. They call that insanity, but I think it happens for other reasons. They're told by their friends that somehow it will work out. And when it doesn't, they're so filled with despair that they don't care if it works out anymore.'

'But what can we do?' said Enos.

"For some people socializing is more important than the truth...." Some people don't care if ideas work or don't work, they only care about who those ideas came from. 'She looked Enos in the eyes. 'We should only judge things based on results. Don't trust the Kool kids,' said Susanna.

The next day at school Enos saw Steven talking to some other kids.

'Well maybe it worked,' Steven said. 'I thought maybe I saw one on the horizon that did blow up, I think.'

Chapter 31

Once or twice a month, Davy went to the house of his Buddhist teacher for a scheduled service.

There were men and women in a large crowd staring at the statue of Siddhartha as they sat on the carpet with their hands together, while little kids played behind them.

The first time Davy went he had no idea what to expect or even do. The man in a suit next to him had to walk him through it.

As the crowd passed around waxy strings, the man in a suit told him to take three of them.

'Now take one and wrap it around your head till one end touches the other,' he said. Davy tried but couldn't get it all the way around. 'God damn it, you have a big head,' said the man, 'that's definitely your white half.' He handed him another string that was longer.

Under the man in a suit's instructions Davy wrapped one around his head and bent it where it overlapped. He held one string in his left hand and grabbed it where it touched his elbow and bent that. He held one string to his neck and grabbed it where it touched his stomach.

The man in orange took all the strings and sat in front of the statue looking out at the people. The teacher sat in front of the statue with his back to the people and together all the crowd began to say,

I go to the Buddha as my Refuge.
I go to the Dhamma as my Refuge.
I go to the Sangha as my Refuge. ...

...

And they repeated it over and over again, till it rang in Davy's ears. Then all the people in the crowd put random food in big metal bowls. Some of the food was home cooked Asian food and some of it was Cracker Jacks and fruit. The people formed a line and put the food around the statue and took money and hung it from a small fake tree with clothes pins.

'Say a prayer for your relatives,' whispered the man in a suit.

The people sat back down and the man in orange twisted all the strings from earlier together and lit one end on fire. He let it burn a while and then put it out in a bowl of water. He then walked around and shook the waxy strings, sprinkling water on everyone there.

The man in orange sat back down and he and the teacher started to eat the food from the bowls. At first Davy cynically thought that these guys had the perfect hustle, they got people to bring them piles of food and made them watch while they ate it. But then people started distributing the food to everyone there.

They all ate and talked freely and it reminded Davy of Thanksgiving, which Davy never really celebrated, but he was celebrating now.

'Here, eat this chicken,' said the man in a suit.

'Why do you keep giving me all the chicken?' said Davy.
'Cause it's wrong to eat meat,' said the man.
'Then why do you keep making me do it?' said Davy.
'Your karma is probably shot anyway.'

Now if you think Davy only went to that Buddhist Temple, you're wrong. He would still go to Susanna's church sometimes.

One day while Susanna was singing a girl grabbed his hand and dragged him into the aisles. And Davy danced with the people there. It was a dance that Davy never did before and that he could never remember to do again. He felt the drums shake in his body and the twangs of the guitar turn his limbs into wet spaghetti. He sweated like a pig, and afterwards he felt like he was drunk; he felt like he was hypnotized.

Later that same day Davy and Susanna went in her room and lay on her bed listening to music--with the door open, of course. She undid her hair.
'Everything's coming to a grinding halt ...'

The drums and the electric guitar reminded him of the same mood he had in that church.

'I heard once,' said Davy, 'that in order for the transporter machine on Star Trek to work, that they would have to destroy a human body and remake it in another place. But I heard that might be OK 'cause people aren't really matter, they're information. Life is information, complicated information. Information can last forever as long as it's recorded.'

'Why did Jesus have to die?' Davy looked at Susanna.

'I'm not sure, and maybe I'm all wrong with what little I do know,' said Susanna, 'but it's a sacred ritual. I think it's an ancient one. Either it's something that Jesus reinvented or something people saw coming through all the ages of history and tried to do themselves, on smaller levels. It's an ancient ritual, where heroes--not only warriors but heroes--would offer themselves to their enemies and let themselves be killed.'

'It happens in a lot of contemporary fiction too. Like how Jim Casy offers himself to the strike breakers, or how Gandalf offers himself to the Balrog, or how Tinkerbell drinks Captain Hook's poison, or how Obi-Wan Kenobi offers himself to Darth Vader.'

'Only Jesus was a Jew that offered himself to the Romans, or God offering himself to humanity. Sometimes you can't fight evil, you can only do good. It made him able to activate his strength, able to take us all into paradise if he has our permission. It's Grace.'

'I like the idea of Grace,' said Davy, 'cause in a way, I know I'll never be able to get to heaven alone. But at the same time I hate the idea that I can't stop sinning. I still want to be motivated to sin as little as I possibly can. That's what I like about Buddhism: there is no Grace, Buddha isn't really a savior, he's a teacher that gave us strict rules to live by, and I think it makes me sin less. Sin is like the hooked teeth of a predator: once you do it it's

almost impossible to go back. There's only one way to go, into the mouth, unless you're ready to take the pain when you rip yourself free. Sin controls you like a zombie. I hate sin, sin isn't just bad 'cause Moses or Buddha said so, it's bad 'cause it makes you stupid and weak. I want to be saved but I want to be strong, as strong as I can be. I wish there was a compromise.'

Susanna put her arms around one of his.

'We can look for it together,' she said.

Days later Davy and Susanna were in his El Camino and besides talking, if you hadn't figured it out, the second thing they did best was kissing. Davy was the only boy Susanna had ever kissed and she couldn't imagine kissing anyone else. Susanna and all of the Morgans were so comfortable with Davy that he was the only boy that they let take Susanna on a date alone.

The first time Davy and Susanna went out alone, there was no proclamation, no decree. They just did it one day, and didn't realize it was happening till it was almost over--they were alone. And alone they talked and they kissed.

Davy pushed Susanna down until she was lying down on the car seat. Davy hulked over her small body and pressed his lips on hers. He pinned her down as if the only thing she could do was kiss back. He would pull his head up and look down on her, and she was smiling.

Susanna always smiled until one day. Davy reached into her overalls and under her tank top. Susanna pushed him off, and Davy was amazed at how much strength was in that little girl.

'Davy, don't do that,' said Susanna.

'Sorry,' said Davy, 'I just got caught up in the moment.'

'I'll bet,' said Susanna. Davy looked at her and she wasn't angry, she was just firm. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him back on her.

They started to kiss again. Davy ran his hand up and down her leg until it got to the bottom of her overalls. He put his hand inside her overalls and his fingers went between her skin and her panties.

Susanna threw him across the car and punched him in the face, hard. Davy grabbed his jaw and glared at her. Susanna's good mood was over.

'Damn it,' he said, 'that hurt!'

'Good!' said Susanna. 'What the hell is wrong with you!? I tell you you can't grab my boobs and you decide to try and finger me!'

'I got to have something,' said Davy, almost joking, but Susanna punched him again. 'What the hell is wrong you!?' yelled Davy.

'You can't talk to me like that, Davy!' said Susanna.

'Susanna, I'm sorry,' said Davy, 'but don't you think you're really overreacting?'

'I'm under-reacting, nimrod,' said Susanna, 'cause I like you. But you don't seem to get the message.'

'I just don't like the message,' said Davy. Susanna grabbed a ketchup packet from the leftovers of their meal and put it on the dashboard of the car.

'Here's a visual aid,' said Susanna. 'This is your hand, and this is your hand on my vagina!' She pounded the ketchup packet and it exploded all over the car.

'Why do you have to do stuff like that?' said Davy. They sat and stared out the windshield for a minute or two. 'Look Susanna,' said Davy, 'I'm just saying it wouldn't be all that weird. How long we've been together, how old we are.'

'What is it, a mathematical equation to you?' said Susanna.

'A lot of people do it Susanna,' said Davy.

'It's not their decision,' said Susanna. 'It's a closed election, and it has to be a unanimous vote. Davy, however weird it is, you knew what I was like before we got together.'

'You knew what I was like,' said Davy. 'You said I wasn't your kind of guy.'

'Why are you like this?' said Susanna. 'You've kept bringing this up over the last week or so, and I'm tired of arguing with you.'

'I know, but it's just... I need it, almost more than anything,' said Davy.

'Davy, I want to go home,' said Susanna.

'Fine,' said Davy, he started up his car.

Davy pulled up to the Morgan house and he saw Clark sitting on the outside couch. Susanna got out and Davy talked before she closed the door.

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'I know you're mad but I'll talk to you tomorrow when we're both cooled down.'

Susanna looked back at the boy and her eyes were filled with caring. 'Davy,' said Susanna. She closed the door. She watched as he pulled into his driveway and went in his house.

Susanna walked up to her father sitting on the couch.

'You're home early,' said Clark.

'Dad,' said Susanna, 'Dad, I....' Susanna wanted to tell her father what happened she wanted tell him with all her being, but every time she opened her mouth her breath was stolen. She tried for five minutes, but she couldn't speak. It was like she just got back from Never Land and a magic spell muted her, and it filled her with distress.

Clark looked at her and soon read her mind. Susanna never told him what had happened but somehow he knew every detail and he held her close.

'Dad, I'm so sorry,' said Susanna.

'No,' said Clark, 'you didn't do anything wrong. You did exactly what I hoped you would do. Baby girl, I am so proud of you, I can't even tell you.'

'Oh Dad,' Susanna said, burying her face in his chest. Eventually she looked up. 'Dad, would it be all right if I went to see Calvin. Right now?'

'Yeah,' said Clark, 'your mother was just on the phone with him, he's home. You want me to go with you?' Clark didn't give time for Susanna to answer or else she would have said yes. 'No, no, you go alone, just drive there and back again, don't stop anywhere.'

'OK Dad,' said Susanna. 'Dad?'

'It's OK,' said Clark. She got in the Nissan and drove away.

Yes, Calvin had moved out to a small apartment on the other side of town, he was sorely missed but he wanted to have time alone. Susanna pulled up to his building and looked up at his door on the second floor.

Calvin had a girl over, one of the reasons he wanted to live alone. It wasn't the first time Susanna was over there; sometimes Calvin had her and her teenage friends over and it was fun, but sometimes he wanted them gone, especially on a night like this.

'You see this, Andrea?' said Calvin, sitting on the couch, pulling up his pants leg and showing the "bite" scar. 'That's from that bear I was telling you about. He snuck up behind me grabbed me from the back and shook me like a ragdoll till I dropped my rifle.'

'Oh my God,' said Andrea, 'how did you get away?'

'I pulled out my machete,' said Calvin, 'and hacked into his face. He dropped me and I grabbed the rifle but it misfired.'

'Oh my God,' said Andrea.

'Yeah,' said Calvin, 'and then he charged at me and you never saw anything so big move so fast. But then I pulled out my forty-four Magnum and emptied it into his chest. And thank God for that.'

'Why didn't you just use the Magnum right after you dropped your rifle?' asked Andrea.

'Cause I had it rehearsed in my mind like that,' said Calvin, 'and I just always follow my plans, 'cause they always work.'

'Wow,' said Andrea. Calvin put his arm around her and kissed her. 'But what about Heather?'

'What about her?' said Calvin.

'Were you really flirting with her?' said Andrea.

'No,' said Calvin, 'I just like talking to people. Besides she's a bowser.'

'Really? Everyone else thinks she's pretty,' said Andrea.

'What? No,' said Calvin, 'it's just 'cause of her boobs, and there's more to girls than big boobs. I don't follow the crowd, I make my own path. I'm a loner, Andrea, a rebel.'

'Oh Calvin,' Andrea laughed and kissed him and they started to lie down.

'You know, I got tomorrow off,' said Calvin.

'Calvin, I don't know,' said Andrea, and then there was a knock at the door.

'Better not be Heather,' Andrea said.

'Jeez,' said Calvin, 'take it easy.'

He opened the door and it was Susanna.

'Who is that?' said Andrea.

'Take it easy,' said Calvin, 'it's my sister. I don't have girls hunting me down left and right... I'm not that lucky,' Calvin said under his breath.

'Calvin, can I talk to you alone?' said Susanna. Calvin was annoyed at first, but he saw the distress in her eyes.

'Look Andrea, I need to talk to her about something,' said Calvin, he turned on the TV to keep his date busy. 'We'll be outside for five, ten minutes.'

'OK,' said Andrea, 'but you're sure she's your sister, right?'

'Dude,' replied Calvin, 'you really need to relax, OK?' Calvin closed his door and looked at his sister. 'Susanna.'

'Calvin, don't get mad--well, don't get crazy,' said Susanna.

'Look, I'm terrible to the bad guys and tender with the ladies, especially my sister,' said Calvin, 'just like Mr. T.'

Susanna grabbed his hands and smiled. She knew it was safe to be open and honest.

'Davy wants to have sex,' said Susanna.

'Asshole. How'd you let him down?' said Calvin. He assumed she repelled him and he was right.

'I punched him,' said Susanna.

'That's my little country girl,' said Calvin. 'You want me to beat the crap out of him?'

'I don't know,' said Susanna, 'but what really made me upset is... is... I couldn't tell Dad about it. Calvin, I've been able to tell him everything. I've never lied to him, never. I've never hidden anything from him ever since I was a little girl. But I couldn't tell him, Calvin, and I've never felt more guilty about something.'

'Susanna, you're not a little girl anymore,' said Calvin, 'so you have problems talking about sex with your parents; everyone does. You have nothing to feel guilty about.' He put his arms around her. 'You did better than a lot of women hope to do; you are better. Susanna, if you ever committed that sin you know Mom and Dad would go insane... no their hearts would break, my heart would break.'

'Susanna you have to wait for a man that you're desperately, madly in love with, a man that Mom and Dad can love like a son. Sure, you've been with Davy what? Half a year, but that just means he could be with another girl in another half a year. You have to be the only one, and you have to know he'll stay with you; you have to be sure of it. Imagine if Mom or Dad were gone, would you want that for your kids?'

'Susanna, you don't have to feel guilty. You should feel proud. I know, 'cause I'm proud of you, and as long as I'm around you don't have to want for pride or love.'

'Calvin,' said Susanna in her brother's arms. 'Am I really that weird?'

'Susanna,' said Calvin, 'I'll probably never tell you this again so listen up. Most of those stories I tell, especially the ones about girls, are crap. Even

the ones that happen aren't like a James Bond movie, it's like... a cross between a Woody Allen movie and an Ed Wood porno. It isn't glamorous, at least it usually isn't for me. And they never show the heartbreak when Bond and those girls leave each other between movies.

'A lot of those guys don't do it for love, they don't even do it for fun. They just do it for macho bullshit prick waving.

'If you're weird, I can't be all that normal either. Weird or not, you have to be true to what you are.'

And for the first time since she was a little girl, Susanna thought her brother was flawless, and he was still her hero.

Susanna walked down to the Nissan. Calvin watched her drive away, then he went inside. He was surprised to find Andrea had turned the TV back off.

'You OK?' said Calvin.

'I turned off the TV,' said Andrea, 'so I could hear you guys better. I'm sorry, Calvin, I couldn't help myself. That door is really thin. I could hear everything.'

'Really?' said Calvin. *Stupid, nosy girl*, he thought.

'Calvin that was so sweet,' said Andrea, as she got up and hugged him.

'Well, you know,' said Calvin, 'a man ain't nothing without his family. And I take care of my little sister... always have.' They sat down. 'Now, where were we?'

'Calvin, I think I'm going to go home and call my parents,' said Andrea.

'Wait--wait, what?' said Calvin.

'I was just thinking about what you said and I just think I want to call them,' said Andrea.

'What?' said Calvin.

'Yeah, I'll think I'll go,' said Andrea, getting up. 'I really like you Calvin, a lot better than Buck.'

'Wait! Buck?' said Calvin. 'Ah God damn it.'

When Susanna got home she didn't go to her room, she went to Enos's and Danny's room. She walked in and sat on Danny's bed, staring at her brother sleeping. She reached over and stroked his hair and Danny stirred and woke up.

'What you want, Susanna?' said Danny.

'I'm kinda scared, can I sleep with you tonight?' said Susanna.

'Did you watch E.T.?' said Danny.

'Yeah,' said Susanna.

'I told you,' said Danny, 'that movie is horrible.'

Susanna lay down and held Danny against her and put her face next to his hair and took in deep breaths till she fell asleep, like she was trying to breathe in his innocence.

The next day Davy walked over to the Morgans' house and sat next to Clark on the outside couch.

'Hey Mr. Morgan,' said Davy, 'my mom said you wanted to see me?' Davy was comfortable with Clark, maybe too much.

'Yeah Davy,' said Clark, 'and I'm glad you came and I wish we could just talk about the weather.'

'What is it?' said Davy.

'Davy, I know about the argument you and Susanna had,' said Clark. 'I know what it was about.' They sat silently for a few minutes. 'Davy, I really like you, and that's why I'm talking to you now instead of kicking the shit out of you.' Davy looked at him and looked away. 'Davy, you can't do that with my daughter, you can't even try, I'm not going to let you.' Davy had no words.

'Davy, if anyone did that to my daughter,' said Clark, 'I'd kill them.' Clark's voice was so strong, calm and deep, that Davy could make no mistake that he was telling the truth.

'I don't think that's emotion, and I don't think that's wrong. There are a lot of things that they say are wrong in this country, but I don't think they are.' Clark continued, 'I live my life the way I want, and I lead my family the way I want. If anyone tries to tell me that's wrong, they can go to hell, and if they want to press the point I'm more than happy to send them there. I'd kill anyone who'd hurt my family--any man who wouldn't isn't a man. For a long time my family was the only thing I had, and now that I don't have want, I'd throw everything else away to protect them.

'Davy I don't want my daughter to be alone,' said Clark, 'but it has to be done right. Now most boys I wouldn't have this discussion with, but you're strong and smart and I think you can handle it. That kind of strength is very valuable, and I know you're smart enough to know I mean exactly what I say.

'Now I know it can be hard; I was kid too once, and if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here. Not that I'm sure you'd want to talk to an old man about something like that, but sometimes, times are weird and you never know, I'd rather you have the opportunity and not need it than have it the other way.

'Now maybe you still have the nerve to go on with this and maybe you just want to tell me to go to hell and our lives are going to fork, but at least you know where we stand.

'In any case, you can't see my daughter for two months,' said Clark, 'and after that, you're still going to have to come and talk to me. Maybe then you can meet my approval.

'Now go on.'

Davy got up and walked back to his house. He felt like he had just had his mind raped. Part of him was mad as hell at Clark and Susanna. That Susanna would tell anyone what they did made him feel betrayed and that

some unspoken rule was broken. And that Clark would threaten his life, in this day and age, in this civilized country made Davy's teeth clinch.

But what turned his world upside down was the absolute nature of Clark Morgan. Davy hadn't been faced with that many absolutes in his life and he almost didn't know how to deal with them. He half believed they didn't exist, but here one was all the same.

And yet he couldn't get over how Clark still seemed to like him, still seemed to want to help him. How could Clark want to help him, how could someone be so ruthless and yet so kind?

That night Davy lay in his bed and stared at the ceiling, part of him fantasized about beating Clark to a pulp but he still fantasized about embracing him as a friend. He had never been so confused.

At first the Morgans reminded him of L'il Abner but now Clark reminded him of Conan. Clark knew what he wanted and he knew what was right and he didn't need anyone to tell him. He was a barbarian, free and strong.

Chapter 32

Davy ran to meet Susanna and Leroy when they went to school.

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'I'm sorry about what happened, but how can you have told your father about it?'

'Davy,' said Susanna, 'I had to, somehow I had to.'

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'there are some things you just can't talk to your parents about.'

'How can they tell me what to do,' said Susanna, 'if I don't talk to them?'

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'your parents can't be right about everything.'

'The more I think about it, the more I think that my parents are right about everything, even if they don't know how to explain it. They care about me more than anyone,' said Susanna, 'certainly more than some guy I know.'

'Susanna,' said Davy.

'I'm sorry,' said Susanna, 'but I love my family more than anything, and if we're going to be together you have to understand that.'

'But Susanna,' said Davy, 'two more months.'

'Look,' said Susanna, 'there's going to be times like this, whether it's my parents or the world that will test us. The time is coming when we have to see if you're really my boyfriend or just some fling. And I know it's hard for you sometimes, believe it or not it's hard for me. But I don't have any use for flings.'

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'you are the good girl from hell.'

They looked in each other's eyes and somehow they grabbed each other's hand for a second but let go, and then they walked to reach the school bus.

When lunch arrived Susanna met up with Sheena.

'I heard you and Davy were on the rocks,' said Sheena.

'I don't know, I think we like, ran into a total tempest but I don't think we're on the rocks yet, hopefully never,' said Susanna.

'Susanna, I don't think he's all that good for you anyway,' said Sheena.

'Oma God,' said Susanna, 'I really hope you're wrong, I really do. I think we understand each other so much that... I think I... I don't know, dude.'

Susanna and Sheena walked down the hallway as three pretty cheerleaders turned the corner with another girl on their heels.

'Guys,' said the girl, 'did you like that fried abalone I made for your meeting?'

'Katy,' said cheerleader one, 'we made our decision. Fried Bologna isn't going to change things.'

'I don't eat Bologna,' said cheerleader two.

'That wasn't uh... never mind,' said Katy.

'Look you're really Kool, but dude, this just isn't your thing, Katy,' said cheerleader three.

'But my mother was a cheerleader,' said Katy, 'my aunt was a cheerleader, my sister was a cheerleader--I have to be a cheerleader.'

'None of my family were cheerleaders,' said cheerleader two.

'Come on, guys, I'm one of the most popular girls in this school,' said Katy. She was shocked when the cheerleaders laughed.

'It's not about that,' said cheerleader one, 'it's about coordination.'

The three cheerleaders walked up to Susanna.

'Not these guys again,' said Susanna.

'Susanna,' said cheerleader one, 'we finally scheduled the new tryouts and we're asking you to go again.'

'Look, I'm totally not into stuff like that,' said Susanna.

'But the dancing you did at Dan Webster,' said cheerleader one, 'you have to try out.'

'I saw her dance,' said cheerleader three. 'I don't think we should even make her try out.'

'Everyone has to try out,' said cheerleader one, 'no matter how good they are.'

'Dude, that just seems like a lot of work for no money,' said Susanna. 'Besides, if I was a cheerleader it'd ruin my punk reputation.'

'Susanna, come on,' said cheerleader one.

'Look,' said Susanna, 'you guys are totally non-egregious in your way, and I'm Kool in my way, we're just different people. But that doesn't mean we can't be friends.' Susanna hugged cheerleader one, and patted her on the back.

'Well, I hope you reconsider,' said cheerleader one. She turned around and walked away, following the others.

'How can you be that nice to those jock riding Barbie dolls?' said Sheena.

'Come on, there's enough hate in the world, Sheena,' said Susanna, 'besides I'm not that nice.'

Sheena looked as cheerleader one had a kick me sign, on her back, only it didn't say kick me, it said,

'Horny as hell;
goose if interested.'

Sheena needed to cover her mouth so she didn't laugh out loud. The cheerleaders turned the corner and then Sheena and Susanna heard a shrill scream.

'What the hell do you think you're doing!? My boyfriend is going to kick the shit out of you!'

Sheena and Susanna laughed their little asses off. Then Katy, glaring at the Sheena and Susanna, walked up to them and started to bitch.

'It's better you didn't try Susanna, 'cause you wouldn't have made it anyway!' said Katy.

Susanna and Sheena just laughed at her.

'Bou bouldn't bave bade bit banyway!' said Susanna.

'You are such a dork,' said Sheena.

Susanna put her skateboard down and both girls got on and skated away, laughing.

At the end of the day Leroy, Sheena and Susanna sat on the couch in the Morgans' house watching Donahue.

"Yodeling drug addicts and the men that love them?" said Sheena.

'You know most people don't know that Elvis was a good yodeler,' said Susanna. Sharon sat down next to them and put a plate of burritos on the table in front of them.

'Oh please, sweetheart,' said Sharon, 'Elvis was an average yodeler at best, now Roy Rodgers-- he could yodel.'

'Why would a cowboy yodel anyway?' said Sheena. 'I thought it was a Swiss thing.'

'Cause,' said Susanna, 'America doesn't have a culture, it's made up of a lot of different cultures. It embraces everything but is loyal to nothing, It's the nation of the future.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' said Sheena.

'No, it's true,' said Sharon. 'Look at these burritos: we made them out of rattlesnake and that recipe we got from Amy, Davy's mom. That's like what, three cultures. American rattlesnakes, Thai spices, and Mexican tortillas.'

'Snake? Really?' said Sheena. She'd already started eating one.

'It's not poisonous--the meat, I mean,' said Leroy. 'That's a common misperception.'

'Hey Susanna,' said Sharon, 'are you still with Davy?'

'Yeah Mom,' said Susanna, 'we're just on hiatus.'

'Oh good,' said Sharon, 'maybe you could all four go to the prom together.'

'Mom, only total bombastic dorks go to the prom,' said Susanna.

'Yeah Mrs. Morgan,' said Sheena, 'no one Kool goes to the prom anymore; it's so cliché.'

'It's totally cliché,' said Susanna.

'Really?' said Sharon. 'But you said cliché is just another word for definitive.'

'Mom,' said Susanna, 'it takes a certain amount of intelligence to contradict yourself.'

'Hmm,' said Sharon. 'I guess I was Kool when I was kid and I didn't even know it.'

One day one of Davy's cravings hit him again. He overheard some kids talking about a party, and the idea that beer would be there made his craving even stronger.

He didn't even know most of the kids there, he didn't even know whose house it was. He didn't care. His cravings made him strong and he walked in that place like he owned it. He didn't talk much with anyone, not even people he knew. His greatest prayers were answered when he heard the word 'Shotgun!' He looked to see two kids standing over the sink poking holes in the sides of beer cans and slurping out of them like there was no tomorrow. Davy pushed other kids aside and grabbed a can. The other kids made a pseudo competition out of it, but Davy just drank 'cause of his cravings, and it made him "shotgun," two beers before the other kids were done with one.

Davy then made a pipe out of one of the beer cans and showed the other kids how to smoke pot out of it.

Nicely drunk and high, Davy had a can of beer in his hand the rest of the night to keep his buzz going. He talked to the other kids but was confrontational and sarcastic. He made every boy there feel like an idiot for his bullshit story. After alienating them all, Davy stood against the wall drinking beer after beer, looking back on all the idiots-- at least that's how he saw them that night.

Davy then noticed that most of the boys were gathered around a pretty, skinny girl. She wore a white tube top and the shape of her nipples poked through the fabric.

Davy walked to her and the crowd of boys parted in front of him like frightened chickens. Davy put his arm against the wall and leaned over her. Davy noticed that she was easily drunker than he was.

'Gwen,' said Davy, 'how you doing?'

'Oh, David Solomon,' said Gwen, 'or is it Davy, now?'

'Do I detect a tone?' said Davy.

'You're a tone,' she said, emoting with her arms. 'For two years I waited for you. Waited through your stupid girlfriends and put up with you stupid friends and kissed your stupid ass. And... and... and then you switched clicks and pick up that red head out of...'

'What's your point?' said Davy. Davy noticeably stared down at her cleavage. Gwen put her hand over her breasts to hide them, but Davy reached up and took her hand away. 'Two years? Maybe three is your lucky number.'

'You're an assho...' said Gwen, just before Davy covered her mouth with his. When Davy was done Gwen let out a beer fouled giggle and nearly fell over. Davy caught her.

Davy grabbed her by the hand and led her up the stairs. Davy found an empty room and they went inside. They kissed and she protested once, but she gave in and Davy pulled that tube top over her head. He grabbed her and crushed her body against his.

Soon Davy came running down the stairs, and he looked shocked. Some of the boys laughed and tried to high-five him but Davy just left.

Katy looked on. She was at that party, too, and she watched everything Davy did.

That next morning Davy woke up to the sight of a beautiful woman. He wasn't sure who it was 'cause his eyes were still blurry. But whoever it was, he was sure it was bad. It was Susanna. She sat on the foot of his bed in his house as he woke up.

'Susanna?' said Davy.

'I know,' said Susanna. She smiled. 'I asked my Dad and he said it was OK if I went and got you; we walk to school all the time anyway. Your mom let me in. I'm glad that if I had to catch you in bed, that you slept in your clothes. Were you up working on a painting?'

'Uh, what?' said Davy.

'Cause you look so tired,' said Susanna.

'Oh, yeah,' said Davy.

'I can't believe my dad let me come and get you,' said Susanna. 'I think he really likes you.' Susanna stroked his hair. 'Now you're going to be late, so get ready!'

'Susanna,' said Davy. Davy went to the bathroom and changed his clothes and brushed his teeth. Davy came out to find Susanna talking with his mother like they were old friends.

The two women looked to see Davy.

'David, you're going to be late,' said his mother.

'Yeah come on, Davy,' said Susanna. She grabbed his hand and they went out the door.

Susanna, Davy and Leroy jogged down to the bus stop 'cause they were late.

'Davy!' yelled Susanna. 'Why the hell whenever you're in a good mood I'm in a bad mood, and when I'm in good mood you're in a bad mood?'

'What?' said Davy.

'What,' mocked Susanna, 'you're such a spaz sometimes.'

'Susanna,' said Davy.

Later that day when Susanna sat in a class, Katy sat behind her. Susanna didn't even recognize her. Sometime into the lecture, Katy scribbled on a piece of paper and passed it to Susanna. Susanna read it and crumpled it up, set it on fire and threw it over her shoulder. Susanna always carried a lighter, not for smoking but just in case she needed to set something on fire.

'Oh my God!' said Katy, leaping to her feet. Another student put the fire out by dropping her book on the flames. Susanna didn't even turn around; she just pulled her hair over her shoulder so it didn't catch on fire.

'God damn it!' yelled the teacher. 'Susanna Morgan! Can you please stop setting stuff on fire?!'

After a bunch of boring stuff happened, the top of the hour came and the kids power walked out of the room.

'It's true, you know,' said Katy.

'That's not true,' said Susanna. 'Davy wouldn't do something like that. You think you know him but you don't.'

'I know him and I know you,' said Katy. 'You act like you're some kind of valley girl but you're a total poser. I know what you're really like. I know your brother's named Leroy. I know you moved from Oilville. You're just a stupid, racist, redneck.' Susanna slapped that bitch, knocking her down, and then yelled at the top of her lungs.

'I'M NOT STUPID! I'M NOT RACIST! AND I'M NOT A REDNECK! ... I'M AN OKIE!!! AT LEAST I KNOW WHAT THE HELL I AM! ... Do you?'

Susanna stormed off. She walked to the lunch hall and saw Davy sitting and eating. Susanna walked over and sat across from him.

'What's up,' said Susanna.

'What's up,' said Davy.

Susanna looked over and saw the crying girl doing what she normally did--crying. She was sitting on a bench alone. Antoine, Sheena's brother, if you don't remember, sat down next to her. Susanna or anyone had barely ever saw him at school, but now he was there every day. His mother saw to that, now that she had time to keep after him.

'Damn girl, why you crying all the time?' said Antoine.

'I don't know,' said crying girl, 'I just feel so stressed out.'

'What are you stressed out about?' said Antoine.

'It... It would take a long time to explain,' said crying girl.

'You want to talk about it?' said Antoine.

'Really?' said crying girl.

'Sure, I'd listen to anything you got to say,' said Antoine.

'Really!' said crying girl.

Susanna giggled. She looked at Davy, who just couldn't seem to share her mood completely. Susanna, lunch-less, grabbed one of Davy's tater tots and ate it. Davy looked up at her. Susanna smiled and Davy frowned.

'Davy?' said Susanna. 'Have you ever had déjà vu while you were dreaming? I don't mean predicting things about real life while you're dreaming. I mean actually in the dream, you feel like you've done this before. I feel it in almost every dream. I wonder how many people are like that.'

'Susanna,' said Davy. He grabbed her hand, 'I think it's awesome you think about stuff like that.'

'Davy you're such a dork,' said Susanna.

Katy walked up to the couple.

'Susanna,' said Katy, 'why don't you ask him yourself? Why don't you ask him about what Gwen Griffin looks like naked?'

'Jesus Christ,' said Susanna, 'can't you take a hint?'

'Can't you?' said Katy. 'Tell her, David.'

Susanna had chosen to ignore the idiot and thought Davy would do the same and was surprised when he didn't.

'It's not true,' said Davy. Susanna looked into Davy's eyes and somehow, somehow she knew it was true. Davy looked into her eyes and somehow, somehow he knew she knew. Katy was telling the truth and Davy was lying. Susanna looked down at the table and her lower jaw protruded forward, and her big lips flexed.

The couple sat like statues in the middle of a dust devil. A dust devil of sorrow, rage, and evil revelation. The world had changed forever, for the worse. They both sat there thinking of ways they could fix it, some simple trick to solve this surprise that a day ago could have been prevented easily, but it wasn't a day ago. This went from easy to fix to impossible, in one day in one night. Things had changed.

Davy reached down to pick up a tater tot. Susanna slapped the tray away, scattering the food on the floor. In a flash Susanna walked around the table and kicked Davy out of his seat. Davy fell on the floor and Susanna kicked him again and again. The other kids stood up and watched the fight. Davy lay on the floor, taking it. Susanna stopped and looked at everyone around them as she panted, then she snorted. She grabbed her skateboard and rolled away. Davy sat up and put his hand over his face.

Susanna left the school right there and then, skipping her last classes. She rode her skateboard all the way home, walked into her room and put her war paint on.

Davy took his time but he did the same. He walked all the way home. He didn't want to ride the school bus in fear of seeing Susanna or Leroy. He walked around the other side of the block so he didn't have to walk in front of the Morgans' house. When Davy got home he just lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. He did all he could not to think. He felt like someone had died but the grief hadn't hit him yet, but he knew it was coming; he could feel the vibrations of the rail.

He lay there till it started to get dark. Suddenly he heard glass shatter. Davy ignored it, thinking he was occupied, but then he heard it again. Davy ran out to the living room. His mother was there.

'David, what is that noise?' said his mother.

'I don't know,' said Davy. He opened his front door to see what looked like a cave woman clubbing to death a Brontosaurus. Susanna was taking a baseball bat to his El Camino. She smashed every window, and they erupted like showers of fairy dust.

'Susanna!' yelled Davy as he ran to stop her. But Susanna turned to look at him, and just one of her eyes looked like rage incarnate. Davy had never seen anyone that mad in his entire life. Her face made him stop like a dog on the end of a leash. He only moved when she raised the bat and chased him. Susanna chased Davy around the car, bashing the vehicle while she did it. She stopped at the front and broke the headlights.

'What's the matter!?' she said, spitting with every word. 'I WON'T PUT OUT, SO YOU JUST GO AND GET IT FROM SOME LIQUORED UP WHORE!?'

'Susanna, I'm sorry,' said Davy.

'I LOVE YOU, DAVY!' said Susanna, 'I loved you. But I'm not going to stand for this... I deserve better than this... We're over.'

'Susanna,' said Davy.

'Go to hell.' Susanna threw the bat at him, nearly missing Davy as he ducked.

Susanna stormed home and stopped halfway. She touched her lips, and then her face. She breathed hard. She ran her hands down her body to her thighs, and then continued home.

Susanna walked in her front door. Only her parents were there, which she thanked God for. They both turned to her.

'Susanna, what's wrong?' said Clark.

'Davy cheated on me,' Susanna said.

'Oh my God!' said Sharon. She ran to her daughter and put the girl's head against her breast. Clark came up behind his daughter and put his arms around both the women. Susanna cried, she cried harder than she had cried since she was a baby, and that war paint ran down her cheeks.

'That son of a bitch,' Sharon kept repeating.

'I was so stupid,' repeated Susanna. The three embraced each other for what seemed hours. 'I'm never going to love anyone ever again,' said Susanna.

Clark picked her up. 'Susanna, I can't say I enjoyed this at all.' Her father said, 'I'd cut my arms and legs off if it meant you'd never get your heart broken, but the world is cruel sometimes, you need to accept it. But you also need to accept that you're the most incredible woman I've ever met.' He walked over to the couch and put her on it, and her parents sat on either side of her.

'It's true,' said Sharon. 'Susanna, you're like a dawn in the dark night of our lives.'

'Susanna,' said Clark, 'someday you'll meet a good man, and he'll see how incredible you are too, and then all these dark times will be worth it. You just need to take it slow and do it right.'

'I hate this town,' said Susanna. 'I want to go home.'

'You are home,' said Sharon.

'No, I mean to Oilville,' said Susanna. 'I don't belong here.'

'Oh no,' said Sharon, 'you belong with us.'

'We belong where we can go,' said Clark. 'Susanna, the Morgans always go forward. We never go back. We went forward out of Oilville, we went forward out of Missouri, we went forward out of Wales, and we probably went forward out some other place before that. We go forward, Susanna, never back.'

Clark and Sharon embraced their daughter. The front door then opened and Calvin and his brothers got home from store.

Davy sat on the couch in his living room. His mother sat down next to him and put her arms around him.

'You OK, David?' said his mother.

'I don't know,' said Davy. 'Why did I do it, Mom? If I had just stayed home that night, or went somewhere else, or tried to hit on another girl, if something was just different enough, everything would be fine. Why did I do it?'

'I mean, I knew it was wrong,' continued Davy. 'But I thought that it would at least make me happy, but it didn't. I thought that if I sacrificed in one area it would at least show up in another, but it didn't, it was just one big loss. I never thought that was possible, I was never told that.'

'Davy, maybe I should tell you something,' said his mother. 'I don't want you to get mad, or do something rash, I just think I should tell you something.'

'What?' said Davy.

'You know why I divorced your father?' she asked.

'Why?' said Davy.

'He cheated on me,' said Davy's mother. 'He cheated on me three times, maybe more, but that's what I know.' Davy looked at his mother and she looked at him, and they never remembered seeing the other so sad. 'Three times,' she continued. 'The first time I thought it was an isolated incident. The second time I thought I could learn to live with it. The third time I knew I couldn't. I don't want you to get mad. I don't think your father's a bad man, he's just not the kind of person that should be married. It probably would have been better for me and him if he knew that a long time ago.'

They sat next to each other for a while as the revelation sank in.

'Why are you telling me this now?' said Davy.

'I don't know,' she said, 'I just think it might help you.'

'Help me how?' said Davy, standing up. 'Are you telling me this 'cause you think I'm like him?'

'I don't know,' said his mother.

'Well I'm not!' said Davy. 'I'm not! I'm a teenager; everyone does stupid stuff when they're a kid. This is just something I'll have to work on, something I can fix.'

'What do you mean fix?' said his mother. 'David, I don't think you'll ever be with that girl again, and the sooner you accept that the happier you'll be. That's the way the world is, people come and people go, just accept it, let go.'

'I can't Mom, I can't,' said Davy, as he walked to the door.

'David, don't go to that house!' said his mother. 'David, you're just going to make things worse! David, please!'

Davy knocked on the Morgans' door. He didn't know what he was going to say, or what he was going to do, something in him just had to see Susanna.

The door opened and a fist hit him in the face. Davy stumbled back and his brain turned off for a spit second. He regained sentience just in time to see Calvin closing in on him. Calvin reached to grab him, but Davy slapped his hands away. Calvin threw more punches but Davy deflected them enough that they did no real damage. Davy grabbed Calvin's arm with his next punch and the two boys took to wrestling until they dragged each other to the ground. Calvin eventually pinned Davy to the ground and Calvin's elbow closed in on Davy's neck to crush it, and it took all of Davy's strength to stop it.

Davy exploded and threw Calvin off him. The two boys stumbled to their feet and Davy shuffled back, ready to defend himself from next onslaught.

'Calvin,' said Davy, 'I don't want to fight you, please.'

'Davy,' said Clark, walking out of the house, 'Susanna doesn't want to see you, I don't want to see you, and Calvin definitely doesn't want to see you. No one wants to see you here, Davy, why don't you just git.'

Davy stood up straight and his eyes watered. Davy turned around and walked away.

The Morgans walked into their house and started to watch TV.

'Do we hate Davy now?' said Danny.

'Yes,' said Clark, 'but we shouldn't be happy about it. You should never be happy about hate. But sometimes it's really hard to avoid.'

This whole time Susanna was in her room crying. She got up from her bed to only get to her dresser drawer were she kept the picture that Davy drew of her. She picked it up and tore it in half.

Chapter 33

Davy went to work the next day. He punched in his time card, dreading what was doomed to happen next. Davy turned around and saw Leroy come out of the manager office. The two boys stared at each other, not saying a word. Leroy punched Davy, knocking him to the ground.

'Leroy,' said Coria, 'hitting employees is wrong, trust me, you don't want to find out the hard way. Oh and your stupid sister quit, something about how she didn't want to work with her stupid ex-boyfriend, your stupid friend, 'cause of something stupid.'

'That reminds me, Charlie Chan. Since you made her quit, you're going to pick up her shifts. That's why employees aren't supposed to date each other, unless they date me. But whatever, I don't know.'

'I'm going to the bank. I'll be back, maybe.'

Coria left Leroy and Davy alone.

'Go clean the bathrooms,' said Leroy.

'OK,' said Davy. Davy grabbed a brush and some cleaner and walked to one of the bathrooms. Davy kneeled in front of the toilet and started scrubbing. He stared into space, as he scrubbed the same place over and over again. He only had so much room in his head, and Susanna was taking up most of it. He had no room for his work.

Then Leroy came in and Davy expected him to hit him again, but Leroy hugged him.

'I'm sorry I hit you,' said Leroy. 'I'm a horrible friend.'

Davy looked at the boy hugging him and saw he was almost in tears.

'Leroy,' said Davy, 'you're not a horrible friend. I'm a horrible friend; I'm the worst friend you've probably ever had. And you're the best friend I ever had.'

'Really?' said Leroy.

'I can't even believe how nice you're being to me,' said Davy, 'after what I did.'

'Yeah, that was really bad,' said Leroy.

'I know,' said Davy.

'I mean awful,' said Leroy.

'I know,' said Davy.

'I couldn't live with myself,' said Leroy.

'I know,' said Davy.

'I'm sorry,' said Leroy, 'I'm just rubbing it in.'

'It's OK,' said Davy.

'I'm sorry, I'll do the bathrooms,' said Leroy.

'No, I already started it,' said Davy, 'I should just work as much as I can. Maybe it'll help me not think about it.' Leroy started to leave. 'Leroy,' said Davy, 'you're a ridiculously good friend.'

'I should have helped you more,' said Leroy. 'I was too neglectful.'

Leroy left, and Davy started to wonder. Was Leroy trying to witness to him this whole time? Was Leroy trying to bring a better part of Davy out this whole time? How could Leroy want to help him?

Later, after the store closed, the two boys sat in the lobby. They tried to play video games but their emotions distracted them too much.

'Man,' said Davy, 'I hate being a teenager. God, I hate it.'

'Me too,' said Leroy. 'My mom keeps saying it should be the best time of my life. If that's true, then the rest of my life is going to be hell.'

'I hate how we're not supposed to have sex,' said Davy, 'but we're so good at it. Man, we're still just cavemen, kind of. We're meant to have sex now, we're evolutionarily designed to screw our brains out at our age, and now we have this weird society where we're not supposed to do it till we have a college education, a good job and a house and a car. It's just unrealistic. Isn't it?'

'Susanna once told me,' said Leroy, 'that maybe all sin is caused by leftover emotions and instincts from our evolutionary past.'

'She told me that too once,' said Davy.

'My parents didn't have a college education when they had us,' said Leroy. 'My dad got one later. And when I was little, we lived with my grandparents,' said Leroy.

'God, I'm so stupid and horny,' said Davy. 'Sometimes I just want it so bad, it's insane. It's so controlling it's scary. I don't know if there's a good solution at all, just imperfect ones.'

'I don't want it,' said Leroy. 'I just feel like I'm expected to, from TV, from the school, from music, even from my family and parents. But I'm just too afraid to act or even say anything against it. I got no one on my side.'

'Wait a minute,' said Davy, 'you don't want it at all?'

'I... I want it, but just not like that,' said Leroy. 'I want what my parents have. I want that more than anything in the world, I just don't know how to get it.' Davy put his hand on Leroy's shoulder. 'Even Sheena pushes me. One time she even threatened to break up with me if we didn't do it.'

'So what'd you do?' said Davy. They sat silently and Davy realized that his friend wasn't going to give him an answer. Davy looked at Leroy and Leroy sheepishly looked away, and Davy's jaw dropped.

'Leroy?' said Davy.

'I used to be like all nerves about how...,' said Leroy, struggling for words.

'You know what you are?' said Davy.

'What?' said Leroy.

'You're a hypocrite!' said Davy.

'What?' said Leroy.

'How come me and Susanna are held to a different standard than you and Sheena?' said Davy.

'What's your point?' said Leroy.

'It's not fair,' said Davy.

'Life isn't fair, Davy,' said Leroy. 'I mean like, every time people assume that everyone wants or needs the same thing, it's always wrong. We're two completely different people, Davy. And Sheena and Susanna are completely different people. You just did what you did 'cause you felt you had a right to it. Everyone's different and they all need different things. People should be free to live the way they want and be judged only by God. Where you so deluded that you didn't know that? Did you think you could guilt trip her, or bully her, or make her think something by saying everyone else thinks that way? You knew what she was like, right?'

'No, I knew that,' said Davy, 'I just didn't care.

'Why not?' said Leroy.

'Cause I loved her,' said Davy, 'oh my God. I actually loved a girl, and she said she loved me. We were in love and I screwed it up. I screwed up both our lives. I'm such a God damn idiot.

'Leroy, do you think there's any way we could get back together?'

Leroy looked at him. 'No.'

The two boys put an arm around the other and they stared out the window.

'Oh my God!' said Coria. 'Will you two gaywads shut up! What the hell are you two even still doing here? We're closed and everything is done. Get the hell out of here!'

'I don't really want to go home,' said Davy.

'And I want to stay with Davy,' said Leroy.

'I don't care if you sleep in the dumpster!' said Coria. 'Get the hell out of here!'

Well, the boys went home from work despite Coria's advice to sleep in a dumpster.

As Davy walked home he realized he felt a little sadder than normal. He felt it on the top of his head and then he felt it creep down his body, like a bathtub being filled upside down. When he finally got home, he felt sadder than he ever had in any time in his life.

Davy lay in his bed. He looked over at the painting he had just finished and thought about what Susanna would say when she saw it, but then he remembered she never would see that painting finished. He thought about a question he had about one of Susanna's ideas and an idea he was wanting to tell Susanna, but he realized that he would never tell her.

Davy thought about all the incredible things he learned from Susanna, things that changed the way he looked at the world and how he looked at himself. Davy realized that she influenced his life more than almost any other person he had ever met. What he would have been if he had never met her filled him with terror, and he couldn't help but wonder what he could be if he still had her. Suddenly Davy started to remember every little adventure they had in the short time they knew each other. They flashed

through his mind so fast and so vividly he saw them even with his open waking eyes. He half thought he was going to die 'cause he never felt like this before.

In a lot of ways Davy never believed anything Susanna said and did; he just remembered it, but now he started believe it. Those memories were working down into a deeper layer of the onion of his mind, and that onion started to sprout.

His heart pulsed and he felt a jolt in his head, his hands, his feet. Suddenly his heart ached, and he couldn't believe it, his heart literally ached. Every thought he had was about Susanna, so much that he refused to blink lest he saw her face. He shook his head trying to get them out; he squeezed his head as if to put pressure on a wound. He felt like he was falling through a hole so deep that it could have gone through the whole world, and it still kept getting deeper. Whenever he thought he was going to hit the ground the hole just got deeper. He sat up just to fall back down again, panting.

Then a figure walked through the wall and stood next to his bed. Davy was terrified to move at first, until he jumped to his feet with all his strength. He looked and the figure was Susanna. Susanna looked at him with the saddest face that he had ever seen on her.

'What?' said Davy. She said nothing. 'What?' he said again, and there was no answer. She just stared at him.

Then, after what seemed an eternity crammed into a minute, Clark walked through the wall and stood next to his daughter. Then Sharon came through the wall and stood on the other side of Susanna, then Leroy, then Calvin, then Enos, then Danny, then Shere Khan. They all had the look of a tragedy on their face. Now if it hadn't been for Davy knowing that the Morgans were still alive he would have thought he was looking at ghosts. And Davy had had times in his life when he was so drunk he wasn't sure he was going to make it to the next day, but he had never hallucinated. He was hallucinating now, though, on something no more exotic than grief.

'Get out of my head,' said Davy, 'please just stop looking at me.'

It was then that he realized that he didn't just lose Susanna; he lost the whole family, and the grief he felt over losing Susanna was multiplied by seven-- eight if you count the God damn dog. And then Davy swore to God he could feel something moving around inside his head. Was his brain actually changing so fast he could actually feel it? He started to wonder if that was even possible.

Davy swore to God he could feel something moving around inside his head.

He fell to his knees. The Morgans disappeared.

Davy's door opened and his mother walked in.

'David,' said his mother, rushing to him, 'oh my God! What's wrong with you?'

'I'm fine,' he said. He wasn't sure how to explain what happened to him, and he didn't want to worry her.

'David, you're not drinking, are you?' she said.

'No, I think I'm just sick,' said Davy. He sat on his bed and his mother sat with him.

'David,' said his mother, 'is that why you didn't go to school today? Is that why you left school yesterday?'

'No,' said Davy. 'Yes.'

'Davy, you missed a test today,' she said. 'The school even called, the teacher said he'd reschedule the test since you're such a good student, but you have to show up tomorrow.'

'I don't want to go tomorrow,' said Davy.

'You went to work tonight,' said his mother, 'you even stayed a lot later than you said you would. You have to go to school tomorrow.'

'Mom, I just...'

'David, I want you to quit that job,' she said. 'I think it's distracting you too much.'

'I don't want to quit,' said Davy. 'That's the only place I can still hang out with Leroy, and he's my only real friend.'

'That's not true,' she said, 'you have lots of friends, like Jacob.'

'Jacob isn't really my friend, Mom,' said Davy, 'he's a stupid asshole. Besides, I threatened to beat him up a couple weeks ago.'

'David, that's another thing the school said,' said Davy's mother. 'They say you got in a fight. They said they almost expelled you one day.'

'Mom, that guy was a bully,' said Davy, 'and he threw the first punch.'

'But not at you,' she said.

'Yeah, but Mom, I can't just watch people get hurt,' said Davy. 'The school should be paying me to beat up guys like that, since they won't do anything. I hate people like that.'

'It's one thing if the other kids don't like a kid, but why can't they just leave them alone? The things bullies do to some of the people at that school--it's oppression. It's like they're just practicing for when they grow up and use laws and politics and prejudice and gangs, if they aren't already in a gang.'

'Jesus Christ,' said his mother, 'don't tell me you've been fighting with kids that are in gangs.'

'Bobby has,' said Davy. 'He got suspended 'cause he stood up to a gang member that's always beating the crap out of him and was twice his size. Suspended for defending himself. The principal just said, "There's no fighting allowed in school for any reason." The bullies never seem to get in trouble till someone finally stands up to them, then they punish the guy for standing up for himself. It's like they're not really after bullies, they just want a status quo. Bobby told me that he's so fed up that he was thinking about quitting school. I tried to talk him out of it. I don't know what he's going to do.'

'Why should Bobby have to leave school? If people left him alone he'd never hurt anyone. School is supposed to be safe. Why do they let bullies and gangsters in school?'

'I...'

'No one should ever make someone do something they don't want to do. No one should ever use violence against another human being,' said Davy. 'It's like a form of rape.'

'Not all authority is bad,' said his mother. 'What about me and you?'

'But,' said Davy, 'you know more about me than I know myself, and you love me more than you love yourself. If I ever have a kid I'd never want to leave them. I'd be afraid something horrible would take my place.'

'Oh David, you can't carry all the wrongs of the world on your shoulders, you have to think about yourself. David, you need to think about your future,' said his mother. 'I've worked hard all my life. You've worked hard all your life; you can't let it go to waste. I won't let you.'

'I'm not sure I care about my future,' said Davy.

'David, don't talk like that,' said his mother. 'You have to make it, you're all I have. You're all I have in this world; you can't fail, please.'

'Mom, why didn't you tell me that it would hurt this much?' said Davy.

'What do mean?' said his mother.

'Losing Susanna,' he said.

'David, how could I know how you would feel?' she said.

'Because of you and Dad.'

Davy's mother's eyes grew wide in terror. She was shocked.

'David,' she said, 'I don't love your father. I chose not to a long time ago. David, you had lots of girlfriends and you chose not to love them. You have to do that now.'

'I think I picked those girls 'cause I knew I couldn't love them. I didn't respect them. But Susanna, I don't think I can stop,' said Davy.

'Why not?' said his mother. 'Didn't you hear what I said? You choose who you love.'

'I don't think that's true,' said Davy. They sat on Davy's bed and Davy's mother thought of how to fight this subtle yet profound insurrection.

'Look David, you have to snap out of this,' she said. 'You have to go to school tomorrow and you have to do whatever else I say. Or you're not going to have the privileges I've let you have before.'

'You can have 'em,' said Davy. He got up and started to walk out of the house.

'David, get back here,' his mother said, but he ignored her. 'David! You have to do what I say!' she yelled, but he still continued. 'DAVID, PLEASE!' she yelled, but it didn't work. Davy got in his car and started it, as his poor mother yelled at him through driver side window.

'David, you're just stressed out,' she said. 'You need a vacation or something. Just please come back inside. Please, you're angry; you're not thinking straight.'

'Maybe I'll take that vacation right now,' said Davy. 'Sorry.' He pulled out of the driveway and sped down the street.

'DAVID!' yelled his mother, running after him, only to stop in front of the Morgans' house. Davy's mother turned to see Susanna looking out her bedroom window. Susanna panicked and closed the drapes. Davy's mother walked back to her house, childless.

Now when Davy's mother worked in that restaurant near the city, Nakhon Sawan, it wasn't uncommon to have plenty of Americans eating there about every other night. Most of them were Air Force men. The other women there mostly weren't interested in the American men; they saw them as no good playboys that weren't averse to a love 'em and leave 'em life style. Truth be told, enough of them were that staying clear of them wasn't the worst advice you could ever get. But when Davy's mother saw his father she thought he was the most handsome man she had ever seen.

He was always with rowdier, more vulgar men that Davy's mother didn't care for, but Davy's father could always make them behave with a look, like a psychic lion tamer. He always seemed so kind and so in control that she couldn't help but be attracted to him.

Lots of times when she started work, she wondered if he would show up that night, and when he did it was a pleasure. He was one of the few customers she felt like she could talk to freely. Sometimes they'd talk about each other's day, and she felt so relieved to have someone listen in a place where she felt she couldn't let her guard down.

One day he was leaving at the same time she got off and he offered to walk her to the bus stop under his umbrella, as it was raining. She couldn't stop smiling the whole way, and he couldn't help but ask her to have coffee with him, then to a movie, then to dinner, then for a drive. They parked on the side of the freeway and listened to the rain pound on the car, and they kissed for hours.

One day he asked her to the Christmas ball at the Air Force base, and told her he'd like to buy her an early Christmas gift. They went to a department store where a woman fitted her into a green dress that was so dark it was almost black, and for the first time in her life Davy's mother put makeup on. She looked in the mirror and didn't even recognize herself; she was more beautiful than any movie star she had ever seen. She protested Davy's father buying something like this for her at first, but when she saw his face when he looked at her, she yielded.

At the Christmas ball everyone looked at the couple in awe. There was no other man and woman there that looked so attractive. Davy's mother felt like Cinderella, only she could stay out past midnight.

One day Davy's father asked her to marry him and she said yes. Months later Davy's father brought his wife to the states, and she wasn't completely satisfied as a homemaker, so he paid for her to go to school. At first Davy's mother thought she could never do it, but she excelled. Just as she was surprised at how beautiful she was, she was amazed by just how much information that brain of hers could hold, and that she never used it

before felt like a crime. Often she'd go home and tell her husband things she learned that he didn't even know, and they were both amazed at how much she succeeded in an American college when she had never gone to school before.

Soon she found she was pregnant and it was the happiest moment of her life. Every day she would savor every movement of the life inside her. She'd talk to it and sing to it. When Davy's father got home she would put her belly up against him so he could feel the movement of his son, and every time it made him laugh with joy.

One day while out shopping she stopped by the office of her true love to have lunch with him. She walked in his office and found him with another woman. Another woman lying on his desk with her legs wrapped around his hips. There was no mistake, no excuse that could change the obvious thing she saw, though she wished there was: he was making love to another woman.

Davy's mother, with Davy still inside her, felt like she was just cut down by the arrow of an Anti-Cupid. A septic festering arrow of sorrow, disappointment, and life changing loss, sticking through her chest, as long as she was tall. That arrow was so painful she fell to the floor before she could find a chair to fall in, and she cried like a faucet. All the time she expected his large hands to grab her shoulders and tell her he was sorry, that he was profanely wrong, but those hands never touched her. She forced herself to look up, only to see her husband making his secretary cry, as he yelled at her at the top of his lungs for letting his wife into his office while his mistress was there. Then she saw the mistress walk by them all calmly and smile as she turned into the hallway.

As Davy's father drove his mother home, he apologized. He apologized in the same tone of voice he ordered dinner with. She started to wonder if that was all she was to him, something he ordered with a side of spicy chicken. Then he said something she couldn't believe. 'I'm a man. I have needs.'

After Davy drove away, his mother opened her closet and found that dark green dress. She threw it over a chair so she could look at it. It looked black save for the green curving highlights.

'David,' she said out loud as tears fell down her face. In her mind, everything in her life was a failure except for her beautiful son, and now he was gone.

She thought about what he said before he left. That love wasn't a choice, and she realized he was right. Davy's mother had no choice but to love her son and sadly she had no choice but to love his father. Some people called her a gold digger but that wasn't true, even though sometimes she liked to pretend it was. She realized that she had done the right thing in leaving that man, but she was lying about how much it hurt. She thought she could bury that feeling and never open it till the day she died, but then she

realized it was a monster that fed on darkness, and that monster just took her son away. She put her face in her hands, cursing the swirling clouds of grief, and anger and confusion.

Chapter 34

Now why Davy drove away, he wasn't even sure of. Maybe he needed time to be alone. But maybe the experience he just had was so profound it hurt. His new awareness hurt, it hurt on top of all that heartache. And now he was trying to get away from that hurt, he was trying to drive away, even though he carried that hurt with him and he couldn't leave it behind.

The windshield was broken so he constantly felt the wind in his face, sometimes it was warm, but sometimes it was freezing, but either way, his will was so strong a hurricane would have a job stopping him. He drove for hours, and hours, and hours, and for all he knew he could have been driving in a straight line in any direction on the compass, or in a circle.

Davy could see the first rays of the sunrise, the first morning of his new pathetic, depressing, stupid life. Suddenly Davy saw the unmistakable spinning blue and red lights behind him, and he remembered, that bitch broke his headlights. The whole night the cops somehow missed him, but suddenly they saw him. If they had seen him only twenty or so minutes later they'd have nothing on him, 'cause that sun would be up, but as luck would have it, they caught him now.

Davy tapped the steering wheel with his index finger. He knew if he stopped that heartache would catch up with him, and he wasn't going to stop for that, for nothing. He stayed the course at first, just driving at regular speed until the cop car started to gain on him in another lane. Davy turned up the radio and floored it and that El Camino took off like the rocket it was.

That rickety old El Camino was finally in its natural element. It was like a fish that just jumped back in the water after a decade or two. Sometimes that car would break down when you looked at it funny but that was only 'cause it was going to school and work and back, but now it was on, now it was needed and it took off like the rocket it was.

Soon another cop car was behind Davy, and it only made him laugh to think that all those movies were kind of true. Ozzy Osbourne was on the radio so loud he could hardly hear the sirens behind him, but the music sure cleared the cobwebs out of his head. He passed cars like they were standing still, he took turns drifting and sliding like a stock car, and when he straightened out he shot forward like the car was hovering just above the road.

The wind pulled on his hair and pounded his eyes so much it hurt, but it only cooled off his hot head. Davy drove like a savant and he was amazed at how free fast and accurately he moved. He could have given Bo and Luke a run for their moonshine, and he even started humming Dixie.

Suddenly he saw something running out of the brush toward the road and he knew that if he didn't change course he was going to hit it.

'Crap-crap-crap-crap-crap,' he said. Davy slammed on the brakes, at first skidding but then the tires unlocked and he turned the wheel. He was

just barely slow enough that instead of rolling he spun in circles. The world spun around him like he was drunk, only more vivid and he was more conscious to enjoy it. He smiled and shook his head, 'Jesus,' he said. The car stopped.

Davy looked at what he thought was a man that he just gave up the chase to miss. It was a tumbleweed. But the thought he could run someone over made him feel guilty.

'Maybe that's enough for tonight,' said Davy. He got out and waited for the inevitable. He put his hands in his pockets and looked bored.

The cops got out of their cars and two of them drew their guns.

'Officer, the light was yellow,' said Davy.

One of the cops saw Davy for what he was, thank God, and walked right up to him and slammed him with his club knocking, Davy to the ground.

Chapter 35

Soon after that Clark and Sharon opened Susanna's door.

'Susanna, baby girl?' said Sharon. 'Are you going to go to school today?' Susanna moved under the sheet to show she was still alive. Sharon walked over and sat on her daughter's bed and put her hand on Susanna's shoulder. 'Oh sweetheart.'

'Look,' said Clark, 'we'll let you stay here today and maybe the rest of the week but next week you're going back. I know it's hard but the longer you don't go the harder it will be to go back. Consider yourself warned.'

Her parents left her. Sharon sat on the couch with Calvin, who would stay the night sometimes on his days off. Clark readied himself for work but stopped when he heard a knock on the door. He went to open it, and Davy's mother was there.

'Amy,' he said with a frown.

'Clark, I need your help,' she said. 'David's in Laughlin. Clark, he's been arrested!'

'What do you want me to do?' said Clark.

'Clark, I'm not sure I can control him,' she said.

'Maybe a couple of days in jail will do him some good,' said Clark.

'And then what?' said Davy's mother. 'Clark, when I go to get him I'm not sure he'll come with me. I need help.'

'What the hell is wrong with his father?' asked Clark.

'I can't get a hold of him I think he's somewhere in France,' she said.

'France?' said Clark. 'What about your cousin's husband?' He looked at her shake her head and he knew her cousin had a similar relationship with her husband.

'Clark, I'm so sorry, but I need your help, please,' said Davy's mother.

'I don't want to help him,' said Clark. 'I don't like Davy and I don't like you.'

'Clark,' said Davy's mother, with tears falling down her cheek, 'he's just a kid.'

Clark called his work and apologized that he had an emergency to take care of and went to join Davy's mother next to the Nissan. But Sharon met him before he left the door.

'Laughlin, Nevada?' said Sharon, 'Clark, I haven't been gambling for so long, and now I have money to do it with.'

'Sharon, this isn't a pleasure trip,' said Clark.

'But Clark I can win, I look like a winner now,' said Sharon. She was wearing a dark blue coat and skirt with red and white polka dots.

'Yeah Dad, I'll go too,' said Calvin. 'I haven't been gambling since I was old enough.'

'Guys, you can't go,' said Clark. 'I'm just going there and back.'

'Susanna said you all should go, and me too,' said Leroy, coming out of the hallway. 'She'll drop Enos and Danny off at school. She said she wanted

some time alone. She told me to go with you guys, even when I told her I wanted to stay home with her.'

'Susanna isn't in charge here,' said Clark. And he was right, because Sharon went out to the VW van and started it. Sharon was in charge. She motioned for Davy's mother to get in, as well as Leroy and Calvin. Sharon had won another argument, the way she always did. Clark got in the back seat next to Davy's mother and they drove away.

Soon Enos and Danny got up from bed and walked to the kitchen table to find Susanna sitting there alone. She was eating a bowl of cereal and there were bowls set for Enos and Danny. Her little brothers sat down.

'Eat,' said Susanna, and they did. Enos looked around and started to look confused.

'Where's Mom?' Enos said.

'Out,' said Susanna.

'Where's Dad?' Enos said.

'Out,' said Susanna.

'Where's Calvin?' Enos said.

'Out,' said Susanna.

'Leroy's...,' said Enos.

'Out too,' said Susanna.

'You mean we're here all alone, with you?' said Enos.

'That's right,' said Susanna smiling. She pulled out the pump action BB gun from under the table and pumped it.

'What the puss bucket!?' yelled Danny.

'Oh my God!' yelled Enos. 'Danny run!'

'Say hello to my little friend!' yelled Susanna. She chased her brothers around the house, shooting them over and over again, giving them bruises all over their bodies.

On the road to Nevada Sharon leaned forward intently, driving and singing to herself.

'Bright light city gonna set my soul on fire...'

'Mom, we're not going to Las Vegas, we're going to Laughlin,' said Calvin.

'Yeah but it's still Nevada,' said Sharon.

Davy's mother was in the back staring out the window, depressed as Eeyore. She didn't want to talk she just didn't have the will or energy but she felt that she had to give something to the Morgans if it was only conversation. She turned to Clark next to her.

'I'm just sorry to ask you to do this,' she said

'It's... I...,' said Clark, 'it's the right thing to do anyway.'

'It's just that I thought that Davy was a lot stronger than this,' she said, 'and he was getting better.'

'Getting better than what?' said Clark. Davy's mother took a deep breath. She couldn't even believe what she was going to say, but she felt she owed the Morgans, she owed them honesty.

'I used to... I used to let Davy drink and smoke pot, in our house. I even let him have sex with girls,' she said. Clark was shocked.

'How could you even think that was a good idea?' he said.

'I don't know, I just thought that kids do it anyway and it was better to have it where it was safe,' she said. 'I just thought I couldn't stop it.'

'Leroy! Calvin!' Clark said. 'Did you guys know anything about this?'

'Uh... no,' said Calvin.

'See what I mean? You don't know,' said Davy's mother. 'I started to think I could stop it. But you can't stop it, I don't think anyone can. I thought he stopped, I thought I could stop him, but I was kidding myself.'

'Amy,' said Clark.

'I don't think anyone can stop it,' said Davy's mother. 'I think most people who don't think their kids do things like that are wrong. That's why I concentrated on the grades. I just thought that if he could just keep his grades up, he must be doing all right, somehow. You always say to judge things by the results.'

'Grades aren't the only results you need to think about, especially since... Amy, the people that give your son those grades,' said Clark, 'don't really care about him, even if they say they do, even if they think they do.'

'Amy,' said Clark, 'it's not black and white. It's not a matter of succeeding or surrendering. Maybe kids do have sex and maybe they do drugs and God knows what else. But you still need to fight it. You need to fight it with everything you have and in any way you can. If they smoked five joints you have to fight so they won't smoke six, and if they smoke six you have to fight so they don't smoke seven. You need to fight for every last inch of innocence, 'cause it might be that last inch that saves their lives someday.'

'I... I'm a horrible mother,' said Davy's mother. 'Somehow I knew that instinctively, but I just didn't do it 'cause I couldn't put it into words. I'm a horrible mother.' She put her head in her hands.

Clark only looked out the window. He was still angry at her; he was still angry at her son. In fact, as charitable as Clark seemed to this woman, he still hated her. But Clark's sense of justice overpowered his hate. He had learned to let his other emotions overpower his hate 'cause he knew hate was the most useless of all of them. But still, as soon as he made sure that asshole boy went home with his mother they could go to hell, as long it was out of his sight.

'If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere,' sang Sharon.

'Mom, why are you even singing that song? We're not going to New York,' said Calvin.

'Cause Frank Sinatra sings in Las Vegas all the time,' said Sharon.

'Mom, we're not going to Las Vegas, we're going to Laughlin,' said Calvin.

'Yeah, but it's still Nevada, I told you that,' said Sharon. 'God, some people are stupid.'

Clark and Davy's mother showed up at the Laughlin jailhouse. She walked in with Clark behind her and stood at the front desk, describing the phone call she had gotten. She showed them her driver's license and the man at the desk looked at Clark behind her.

'Is that his father?' the man said.

Davy's mother turned around to look at Clark.

'No,' said Clark, 'I'm her neighbor.'

'My friend,' said Davy's mother.

The two walked to another building, led by a cop. It was plainer than the Greek columned one they walked into before. They looked up at the high windows and they had bars.

As soon as they walked into the building the cop spoke.

'He's in one of the solitary cells in the back.'

'Thank you,' said Davy's mother, 'thank you for protecting him.'

'Protecting him?' said the cop. 'We had to, he kept fighting with people.'

They walked between the four big holding pens. One was filled with teenagers, believe it or not. One was filled with rowdy tourists. One was filled with rowdier tourists and one was filled with bikers, gangsters, punks and cowboys. They all watched and talked to each other as the cop, Clark and Davy's mother walked by. One of the bikers spoke to Davy's mother as she passed. He had a big black eye.

'Ma'am, that boy of yours has one hell of a left hook,' he said, as he snorted and spit on the floor. Davy's mother realized that the cops weren't trying to protect her son; he graduated to that solitary cell after he graduated from all four of those holding pens.

They got to a door and the cop started to open it. And Davy's mother started to panic. Now that woman had suffered and seen trials that would blast the soul of many brave men, but at that moment she was terrified to see her son.

'Clark, I can't see him,' she said, 'I can't, I can't, I can't.'

'Amy, it's your son,' said Clark.

'Clark, talk to him first, please,' Davy's mother said. 'Just see if he's OK and just tell... please.'

Clark walked through the door and down the hallway. Clark heard singing.

'Getting to know you...'

Clark recognized the voice and found its source. It was Davy. Davy was crouching in a cell just a little wider than the room it took to stand. He was singing in between his laughter and looked delirious. He looked up at Clark.

'Mr. Morgan,' he said.

'God damn it, Davy,' said Clark.

'What are you doing here?' said Davy.

'Your mother asked me to come with her while she bailed you out,' said Clark. 'She thinks... I'm supposed to make sure you go home with her or something. You will, won't you? I'm not going to have to knock you around, am I? They're not going to have to put me in here, are they?'

'No, no sir,' said Davy. '... Sir, I'm sorry.' Clark was filled with all sorts of emotions but one bubbled up, and if he couldn't beat the crap out of that asshole kid, he was going to say what he thought of him.

'Davy, I liked you at first,' said Clark, 'I really did. You're smart, strong and have talents that a lot of people would kill for. But you're also an arrogant, alcoholic, man-whore. You're a lost cause, Davy, and I don't want you around my family. You're going to shut the hell up on the ride home and not cause any trouble and then you better not cross my path again. If your mother ever asks me to help you again, I won't.'

Clark started to walk away until he heard Davy speak one word.

'Dad.'

Now that's what I think they call a Freudian slip.

Clark turned around, shocked, and Davy turned away, embarrassed, and started to pant and threw his head down. Clark thought he understood Davy till then, but now he knew that he really knew him. In so many ways Davy was a man; in fact, he was better than a lot of men twice his age. But in a lot of ways, the most important ways, he wasn't. He had never been taught how to be, he had hardly even seen it. One of the few exceptions was Clark Morgan. A man that hated him, a man that he wronged, was the most influential man in his life.

Clark, in a somber stupor, walked to meet Davy's mother.

'Is he all right?' she said.

'He's his usual sarcastic self,' said Clark.

Davy's mother walked into the room to talk to her son. She returned in ten minutes and hugged Clark.

'Clark, I know this is hard for you,' said Davy's mother. 'I'll get David's car out of the impound, or rent a car or take a bus or something. I'm so sorry.'

Clark stood at the front door of the police station and looked back as Davy was freed and he and his mother embraced and she cried. Clark walked outside and took a deep breath. He walked a way down the road to avoid the Solomons.

Meanwhile Sharon, Calvin and Leroy walked down main street looking for a suitable casino that could show a profit. She walked into one and the boys went in with her. But Leroy was pushed back out 'cause he wasn't old enough. He looked back in the windows around the door and saw his mother and brother laughing at him before they went to the tables. Leroy walked to the curb and sat down. He was expecting to wait a while, but he

didn't. Sharon and Calvin came out in what seemed like minutes, looking depressed.

'What happened?' said Leroy.

'I really think every time I start to win they switch the dealer,' said Sharon.

'Mom, I told you they always do that,' said Calvin.

'What happened?' said Leroy.

'I lost three hundred dollars,' said Sharon.

'Oh Mom,' said Leroy.

'I know,' said Sharon. 'I could have gambled more but if I lost more, your father would kill me.' They looked at her for a while. 'No, he wouldn't do that,' she said, smiling, 'but he would be disappointed.' She sat down on the curb with the two boys.

'You know, when I was about your age,' said Sharon, 'I used to dream about coming to a place like this, a casino, and coming home a millionaire. But you know, now I think that places like this don't really make money, they just move it around a little. Not like your father, and the people he works with and people like him--they make money. If you boys learn anything from your father, that's what you should learn. Make money, don't just move it around.'

Calvin and Leroy looked at their mother.

'Besides,' said Sharon, 'when you gamble you might be happy, or you might be sad, but if you buy beer you'll always be happy afterwards. I brought some Tabasco sauce and I got a craving for beer and tomato juice. Besides, I've gone a month without drinking. I think that makes me a non-habitual drinker. Come on, let's go get your father and go to a bar.'

'Mom, maybe you shouldn't just assume you don't have a problem,' said Leroy.

'I'm not a habitual drinker!' yelled Sharon.

And they did just that, and Leroy had to wait on the curb again.

Chapter 36

Now while all that was happening, Susanna was driving the Nissan with Enos and Danny in the back. She wasn't going to drop them off at school; she was driving somewhere farther away. And yes, in a way she was disobeying her father, but in another way she was doing just what he wanted her to do.

Well soon enough, after an hour or two, she came to where she was going—Oilville, said a road sign. Susanna pulled off the freeway to a trailer park. It was between the freeway and some railroad tracks, which made it cheaper. There was a forty foot billboard with a half-naked woman on it holding a beer can, standing in the lawn surrounding one of the trailers.

This was the place where the Morgans used to live. This was where Susanna lived her whole life before she moved to Los Fronteriza. She looked up at the billboard and remembered climbing it as a little girl and sitting on the walkway in front of the picture, watching the cars and trains roll by.

Susanna pulled up to the front driveway and saw a sign.

'SCHEDULED TO
BE CONDEMNED'

She stopped the car in front of the landlord's office and jumped out.

'Susanna,' said Enos, 'don't go crazy!'

Susanna burst into the office and saw an old man sitting at a desk and a younger man staring out the window.

'What's with that sign!?' said Susanna.

'Sign?' said the old man.

'The condemned sign!' said Susanna.

'Oh,' said the old man, 'well we're closing down.'

'You can't just kick these people out on the street!' yelled Susanna. 'I won't let you!'

'Now girl, don't fly off the handle,' said the old man, 'there's hardly a soul that still hardly lives here.'

'What!?' said Susanna. The younger man turned around and looked at Susanna and smiled for a second, like a joke was just played on her.

'Yeah,' said the old man, 'a lot of them have just moved. All over the state, too. Into houses, into apartments or into other trailer parks, there's hardly anyone that lives here still.'

'Are you sure?' said Susanna.

'Oh yeah,' said the old man, 'not just all over the state but all over the country. There was even one guy that moved out to Kansas. He said that his grandparents always dreamed about buying back the farm since they moved to California, and he finally got the money to do it. Can you imagine that? A family that lost their birthright three generations ago and finally got it back.'

'He didn't go back,' said Susanna, 'he went forward.' She smiled.

'What?' said the old man.

'Nothing,' said Susanna, 'nothing.'

'Not that everyone is leaving Oilville, mind you, there's a big line of new houses down the freeway from here where a whole mess of people are moving in,' continued the old man. 'Believe it or not, a lot of the oil fields are opening again.'

'But they said the fields were dry,' said Susanna.

'That's what I thought, but I was talking to a former tenant here,' said the old man, 'and he said he got a job at one of the oil companies. He said they got all new drilling techniques, that they can get to oil they were never able to get to before. He said it was all because of computers. He said computers can track the oil and push and pull the drills better than any human alone.'

'He said a lot of it was just efficiency. He said they spend a quarter of the money to drill that they used to spend.'

'He said computers are changing everything--better drills, better cars, better farming equipment, better boats, better trains, better plains, better spaceships, better everything. Milking that oil for every ounce of energy they can get from it. The way you hear him talk computers will make gas tanks the size of thimbles and squeeze gold nuggets out of turnips.'

Susanna could only laugh, 'In fifty years or so, who knows?'

'I don't know, it seems like the whole world is moving so fast and we're just trying to catch up,' said the old man. 'What if we're just turning into a culture of button pushers? What if no one is going to do a lick of hard work ever again?'

'They will,' said Susanna, 'making what we still think impossible possible. When everyone gets bigger muscles, you just add more weights.'

The younger man turned back to Susanna and she saw that smile was just a blip in his otherwise confused mood. 'I don't know about the companies working in that field,' the young man said. 'They're shipping in people from all over the world. They even got Russians working there, and they're our enemies. How can we help ourselves by helping our enemies?'

'Jesus said, "Love your enemy,"' said Susanna.

'But aren't we going too far? Wasn't that just a spiritual thing? One guy that used to live here said he got job in a Japanese car factory. A Japanese car factory in America--that should be illegal.'

'But if they're giving Americans jobs, what's the difference?' said Susanna.

'Maybe if that's all they did,' said the young man, 'but they got immigrants working there from all over the place.'

'But if they help make the factory get bigger and better, isn't it better for everyone?' said Susanna. 'Wouldn't they be able to hire even more people and more Americans?'

'But some of these people aren't even from democracies,' said the young man.

'Democracy or not, no country can compare to this one,' said Susanna.

'But why do we need people from other countries? Why can't they just make their own countries better?'

'Those people may look like the other people in those countries but they're not like them,' said Susanna. 'They're a newer and better people. Those other countries are for the older people. This country is for the newer people, the better people. All who want freedom and don't take the freedom of others are better people. They can't make those other places better; the older people won't let them, but they can make this country better, if we just let them have freedom.'

'We can't let too many people in. We can't support them all. There's a limited amount of resources, money and jobs,' said the young man.

'Free people always find a way to use new resources and use old resources in new ways, through technology, increased efficiency, division of labor, and trade. Life finds a way; it's evolution. That field was dry and now it isn't. How can you look out that window and think there's limits to anything. "A limited amount of resources, money and jobs?" That concept has done nothing but cause war, hatred, and poverty. What's more, it's wrong, probably more wrong than any concept ever, and I'm tired of it.'

'But what's the point? What are we going to? When is it going to end?' said the young man.

'History shows we can do incredible things if we just judge things based on results. The point is to make yourself better. We're going to prosperity and freedom that we never imagined possible. It never ends, as long as nobody stops it,' said Susanna, "cause if that happens we're all ... We can never let it stop.'

The two men just looked confused and Susanna left.

As Susanna walked out the door she thought maybe her argument fell on deaf ears, but then she thought that maybe it wasn't. Maybe people change their minds like they change their clothes, in private. That way they could just pop out the front door and pretend they always look like that.

As Susanna drove through the park she saw what the old man said was true. There were no people, no children playing, and no cars in the driveways, save the ones that were broken down. She stopped at her trailer, or what used to be her trailer. It looked like a pile of junk with a white box in the middle. She turned the car off and got out. She stared at the thing for a while and then climbed up on top of the trailer's roof and stood up, staring at the mountains. At the base of the mountains she saw the distant dots of vehicles going into the tan desert-like oilfields. In the distance there were pumps teeter-tottering away. Susanna had seen plenty of oil pumps in her life, but she never saw one working before. She looked down the freeway and saw the new houses the old man was talking about. She couldn't see them that well but they looked a lot like her house.

Susanna smiled. She realized that even if she wanted to go back to the old Oilville, soon enough it would be impossible, and she knew it was a good thing.

Enos and Danny got out and looked at their sister.

'Susanna, what are we doing here?' said Enos.

'Sometimes I don't want to be human,' said Susann. 'I want to be free. I want to be free of any order, any demand, any threat, any lie, everything. I want to be free of any judgment, any guilt, any expectation, any pain except the ones I want and take into my life. I want to be free of my past and free of my future except for what I choose to keep. I want to be so free that I can fly faster than the speed of light, and embrace what I want and shun what I want. I want that freedom more than I want air. I want to be free. That's why I'm not sure if I want to be human sometimes.' She turned and looked down at her brothers. 'Do you think a human will ever be that free?'

'Susanna, of course we're free,' said Danny, 'we're Americans.'

Susanna laughed out loud. 'That's right!' said Susanna. 'I'm an American!' she yelled as she turned to the horizon, 'I'm the American you thought you killed! The American you thought starved to death in the streets, the American you thought was shot dead by the cops or by gangsters, the American you thought drank themselves to death, that threw away what little money they had on whores and gambling! I'm the American you tried to fill with guilt, with shame, with hatred, with jealousy, with hopelessness and loneliness, till I put a gun in my mouth, but it didn't work. I'm alive and I'm an American. I'M AN AMERICAN, GOD DAMN IT! AND YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!' Susanna smiled and laughed.

Susanna jumped down from the roof and rolled on the ground. She walked by her brothers and kicked the trunk of the Nissan open and reached in. She picked up the pistols the Morgans kept and put them in a belt, put the belt on and then she grabbed the shotgun.

'Oh no!' said Enos. 'She's got the real weapons now!'

And Susanna walked up to the front door of that trailer and with a grimace blasted the knob off, throwing the door open. Susanna walked through the trailer like a postman gone berserk. She blasted holes in the walls of both rooms again and again till that gun was empty. She threw it down and pulled out the pistols. She slid open the closet door. The closet she used to sleep in. The closet that was her room. The closet she spent her whole life in. She filled that closet all full of holes, yelling the whole time.

'I'm not going back! I'm not going back! I'm not going back! I'm not going back!'

Enos and Danny looked on in shock, seeing flashes of light in the dark doorway and the ear deafening blasts, until they heard the last one. Susanna walked out of the trailer holding the shotgun in one hand and a pistol in the other, and the other pistol in her belt. She walked by her brothers and put the guns back in the trunk.

She turned to her brothers. 'Who wants ice cream?!'

'Yeah!' said Danny. 'We came, we saw, we kicked its ass.'

'Jesus,' said Enos.

The three youngest Morgan children drove off. They stopped to get ice cream and went home.

Now being the only sober one left that day, Leroy was driving the VW van back across the desert. His mother and Calvin were asleep in the back, and Clark in the passenger seat was staring ahead, in one of his brooding moods. Leroy made small talk with his father but Clark's responses were lukewarm. Clark was deep in thought apparently, but Leroy was working up the courage to say something.

'Dad, was Davy all right?' asked Leroy.

'Physically he looked fine,' said Clark, 'but the inside, that's another matter.'

'Dad,' said Leroy, 'I'm really sorry. I should never have been friends with him.'

'I don't know,' said Clark, 'maybe.'

'I just thought he needed a friend, a real friend,' said Leroy. 'I thought I could help him.' Clark put his hand on his son's shoulder.

'You're going to make a better man than I am, Leroy,' said Clark. 'I don't know why you didn't inspire Davy, 'cause you inspire me all the time.'

Clark looked over in the distance and for some reason a giant white cross was standing alone in the desert.

'Leroy, pull over here,' said Clark. Leroy did and Clark got out. Clark left the van and walked across the desert to the cross.

Now Clark sometimes had his doubts on whether God existed but they were very rare and he pretty much outgrew them. More often Clark just hated God. He hated the apathy God had for the troubles in his life and his family. He hated the apathy God had for the troubles of humanity and the world in general, from everything to the Holocaust to the death of the Dodo. Yes, there were a lot of things Clark hated about God but he was the only God there was and if Clark was gonna get anything done he was going to need his help. But Clark wasn't going to like it and he was going to make sure the man upstairs knew it.

Clark stood in front of the cross and kneeled on one knee. One knee humble, one knee defiant. He kept his eyes open; he always prayed with his eyes open.

'What the hell do you want me to do? Why am I supposed do this? I get it, I get this kid needs help, but why does it need to be me? Of all the people on earth, you pick me. I have five kids already, and I have my hands full with them.

'He wronged me, he wronged my family, he wronged my daughter, my beautiful daughter. I don't like him. He's lucky I don't kill him.

‘Yes, I know it could have been worse, but it could have been better, too. Why the hell shouldn’t it be better? You sure take your sweet time making it better, don’t you?’

‘Why does it have to me? Why do I have to give? People have been taking from me my whole life and now, when I finally have something, you want me to give. Why me? Why?’ Clark put his face in his hand. ‘It just isn’t fair.’

And with that Clark had his answer. He knew he had to learn the lesson he had taught to his children their whole lives. He knew what he had to do.

Clark lifted his head in amazement as he heard a low, deep voice break the silence--a low, deep and clearly audible voice.

‘Have you ever considered Big Brothers of America?’

Clark turned around to see Sharon standing behind him, giggling.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ said Clark.

‘Uh, nothing,’ said Sharon. She turned and started twiddling her fingers, looking guilty. Clark grabbed her hand and held her to him and kissed her as passionately as if it was their wedding day. They then looked into each other’s eyes and started laughing. They laughed so hard they fell down on the ground and laughed still in each other’s arms.

Clark didn’t want Sharon to come at first but now he was glad she did. Even when things were at their darkest Sharon couldn’t stop joking. A lot of people thought this was annoying and a lot thought it was inappropriate, but it was exactly what Clark needed. Till now his problems seemed overwhelming and impossible to overcome. He saw the world as so dark that he even swore there was a black veil over his eyes. But now he could do anything; the hardest things looked smaller and easier.

They walked back to the van, and got in the third row of seats, behind Calvin. Leroy pulled out onto the freeway and drove back home.

Chapter 37

'I know what's going to happen. I want to have just two cans but I know after that second one I'm going to want to keep the feeling going and I just keep going till I pass out. But I still want it--God, do I want it--and yet I don't. Sometimes I just want it and sometimes I feel like I just have to have it for no real reason, like it's a job that I don't get paid for.

'Sometimes I go to parties just 'cause I hope there's beer there. One time they had cocaine and I knew I couldn't do that anymore. If I did cocaine the way I drink beer, I think I'd be in real trouble.

'I want to drink so I can turn my mind off. I just want to turn it off for just an hour or two. All the times I was too weak to stop something bad from happening to me, or all the bad things I said and did but now I can't do anything about.

'They play over and over in my mind like the most annoying commercial that was ever made, or the dorkiest indie film ever seen. Except it's my life. Then that same mind wants me to drink to turn it off just for an hour or two, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

'Sometimes I feel like things will never be good again, if they ever really were. That I'm chosen for failure, and I just want to enjoy the way out.

'I dream about turning it off for good. I dream about tying a noose and hanging myself from the tree outside. That's my fantasy sometimes. I lie in bed dreaming about it--that's my fantasy. Isn't that messed up? I'm so messed up. I feel so guilty even talking about it, I feel like I'm just whining, but I'm getting too afraid not to talk about it. Isn't that messed up?

'I used to not care if I hurt other people, or if they were jealous of me 'cause I thought that must mean that I'm doing great. Whatever cares I had I tried to hide them by being macho. But now I can't stand to be like that.

'In this world you can either be a sinless nobody or a tyrannical somebody, and that's it. Either way I'm worthless, I just take up room other people could use better or need more.

'Maybe it's better that I ...'

Clark stroked Davy's head and hair, and put his hand on his shoulder.

For the last week or so Clark had been spending time with Davy. As soon as the Solomons got home, Clark met with Davy's mother. He knew he had to try and help her if she was even willing, but she was. She was very willing. Davy's mother told Clark everything about Davy. She told him when he neglected school, when he was out too late, when he was drinking or just seemed to be acting weird. Clark would go to the Solomons as soon as he got off work and ask his mother how Davy was doing.

Lots of times Clark and Davy would just talk for hours and lots of times that's all Davy needed. Inside him troubles just festered and grew, but he was surprised how much they lifted and subsided just by talking about it.

In some ways it was a scary experience for Clark, 'cause he never imagined that Davy was so depressed, and he was. Maybe it was 'cause he missed Susanna, maybe it was 'cause he missed his father, maybe he was just made that way. But maybe Davy was a lot more sensitive than he let on, because sensitivity is just a hair away from perception and Davy was very perceptive. And maybe all that sadness just built up his whole life, trickling out in anger here and there but never releasing, 'cause he never knew how; he never knew it was OK.

He also never knew how good it felt to be held in the arms of a man, of a father. When Clark put his arms around Davy he was surprised how gentle and tender those strong arms could be, and how safe he felt, and how strong he felt when it was over.

'Isn't that messed up?' said Davy, 'I used to think that only crazy people thought like that, but now...'

'Yeah, it's not as weird as you think,' said Clark. 'There was a time when I was cleaning one of my pistols and all I could think of was putting that thing to my temple and pulling the trigger.'

'Why would you want to?' said Davy.

'Why would you want to?' said Clark. 'It's surprising just how good we are at hiding things like that, isn't it? But I decided long ago I'm not going to give all those sons of bitches the satisfaction.'

'Besides, things aren't always that bad, and death will get us soon enough. It always wins in the end--why give the bastard a victory he didn't earn?' They looked at each other and smiled.

'Does the sadness ever go away?' said Davy.

'Oh no,' said Clark, 'it doesn't even get weaker, and in some ways it gets smarter and trickier. It comes at you disguised and sideways.'

'Then what do you do?' said Davy.

'You get stronger, you get stronger than the sadness,' said Clark, "cause it sure as hell isn't going to get weaker. And you have to do it. Sadness has been used to enslave men just as long as bars and chains. God only knows how many atrocities were committed by men that were proud of their sorrow or proud of instilling it in others. 'Cause there's no honor in sadness, Davy, especially if it doesn't help anyone.'

'What you said--"a sinless nobody or a tyrannical somebody"--it's wrong. I used to think that I could only be successful if I hurt other people. I used to think I failed because someone else succeeded. Now I know that was a lie. The people that hurt me were also hurting themselves. And the people that helped me were also helping themselves. Mark Twain was wrong about good deeds. I can't say I agree with everything God has done, but maybe he knew a little when he made this world.'

'But I used to think God made me rich and God made me poor. But God set us free a long time ago. In the next life he will save us, but in this life he won't save us from the ramifications of our sins. But he also won't stop us

from reaping the rewards of this world or from helping other people. People can hurt and help other people more than anything in this world.

'You don't have to hurt people to be successful, Davy. In fact, hurting people can make you a failure, and helping people can make you more successful than anything. There is no surplus population. You are valuable, even now when you don't even know it, you are valuable. You don't just take up room. Your existence and your success and your actions don't hurt people, they help them. Just by living your normal life you're helping people, people you don't even know. And if you were gone those people would live poorer lives because of it.'

'There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. Your happiness helps other people, and their happiness helps you. In fact, it's wrong to not want to be happy; only evil can come from it.'

'It's not wrong to want to be happy,' repeated Davy.

Clark sighed and they sat for a while.

'I heard a weird story once about a guy on a bridge. Well, he was going to jump off it.'

'Was it the Golden Gate? I heard like, ten people jump off that bridge every year,' said Davy.

'Yeah I think it was,' said Clark, 'but anyway this guy was going to commit suicide and he tried jumping off one side but he couldn't climb over the gate.'

'Gate?' said Davy. 'I don't think they have an actual gate on that bridge.'

'Yeah they do,' said Clark, 'every bridge does, and it's called the Golden Gate Bridge.'

'Yeah, but it's not so tall you can't climb over it. I know, I've seen it,' said Davy.

'OK, I never said I was sure it was the Golden Gate Bridge,' said Clark. 'You did, and that's not important to the story.'

'Sorry,' said Davy.

'Anyway, this guy tried to jump off one side and couldn't get over the fence,' said Clark, 'so he got the idea to run to the other side 'cause he thought he could jump off easier on that side. Well he started to run and almost got hit by a car. And the idea of getting hit and killed by a car scared him so bad he couldn't get to the other side to kill himself.'

Davy and Clark laughed.

'See,' said Clark, 'if you could talk someone out of killing themselves for ten minutes they might get over it; it's like the weather.'

'Yeah, it's totally weird,' said Davy. 'Like, if you want to kill yourself just wait ten minutes.' They laughed again.

'OK, I'm going to talk to your mom. You finish up your homework,' said Clark. 'You were a genius once, let's see if you can do it again.' Clark waited for a minute. 'Davy, I'm really sorry about saying you were a lost

cause. I was angry, and that's something no one should say to a kid. You should never say it to anyone.'

Clark patted him on the back and walked out of the room.

Clark walked over and sat next to Davy's mother on the couch, watching TV.

'Thank you, Clark,' she said. 'Thank you. I can never pay you back.'

'There were times I couldn't pay someone back once,' said Clark.

They sat for a minute. 'That's 'cause they moved and changed their name.'

'What?' said Davy's mother.

'That's just a joke,' said Clark. Davy's mother laughed.

'Clark, I don't deserve this. I know you're doing it for David, not me,' she said.

'Amy, I thought about what you said. You're not a bad mother,' said Clark. 'I should have stopped you when you said that. I was angry. You're not a bad mother. You did all you could to push that boy and molded him into one of the most hard working, intelligent, strong young men I ever met. You were bound to have trouble along the way. If anyone's a bad parent, it's his father.'

'To leave a woman like you and a boy like Davy, that man must be an idiot. It's one thing to divorce your wife but to divorce your kid... that man is going to have one hell of a time getting out of hell.'

'Amy you're a good woman.'

'Thank you,' said Davy's mother. 'My real name's not Amy, it's Kanokwan.'

'Kana...' said Clark.

'Kanokwan,' said Kanokwan.

'Kanokwan,' said Clark, 'you're a good woman.'

'Thank you,' said Kanokwan. She grabbed Clark's arm and put her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair. They sat that way for a half hour.

'I'm going to go,' said Clark, getting up. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'You're going home?' said Kanokwan.

'Yeah, but I'm going to stop somewhere first,' said Clark.

Clark walked outside the Solomon house and then stood against the wall just next to the corner. He waited there for almost another half hour. He waited until he heard a window open and he saw Davy walk out on to the front lawn.

'What the hell are you doing?' said Clark.

'Uh, getting the mail,' said Davy. Clark grabbed Davy by the neck and escorted him back to his window, kicking him all the way. Then Clark threw the boy back through his own window.

Clark walked in his house and prepared himself for the same fight he had been having since he decided to help Davy. The whole family was there and watched as Susanna marched up to her father.

'Dad,' said Susanna, 'how can you do this? How can you want to be with him, after what he did!?'

'Susanna, I know you're hurt more than you ever have been, and I'm hurt too,' said Clark, 'but I can't just not help someone.'

'Dad why, why do you have to help him?' asked Susanna.

'Because I don't think anyone else will,' said Clark.

'You're a traitor!' said Susanna.

This was the first long, real conflict Clark and Susanna had had since Susanna was being potty trained, and its odd nature hovered like a curse-spewing specter in the house. Clark and Susanna had always agreed on everything. All their arguments were more like discussions and one usually ended up agreeing with the other. Even if it wasn't then and there, they ended up reaching the same conclusions separately. This weird cataclysm rocked the family in a sideways, odd manner. Nothing really changed but things just didn't seem right, like someone on the news announcing blue and green were really just the same color.

'You're a traitor!' said Susanna. She turned around and stomped toward her room.

'Susanna! You can't talk to me like that,' said Clark. No matter how much they disagreed, he was still her father and he expected a certain amount of respect. Susanna stopped and started to pant.

'Susanna!' said Sharon. 'Turn around and apologize to your father.' Susanna turned around and breathed deeply.

'I'm sorry Dad,' said Susanna. She turned around and walked into her room.

Sharon walked over to her husband and hugged him. Clark put his arm around her and put his face on her head and breathed in the air from her hair.

Susanna was on the roof of the school again and was watching the blue shimmering car in the parking lot, with flocks of birds flying around it. Now when Susanna felt angry or helpless or bored or sad or happy or cocky, she did bad things. She wasn't sure why she did it, she just got an incredible thrill to see something out of place, to see something in a way that it shouldn't be. It was her last great vice and she couldn't help it sometimes.

Her target was the car, the bright blue Camaro in the parking lot that belonged to another student. The car was so beautiful and so expensive that it had to be her target; it was like a man in a tuxedo so fancy you just had to throw a pie at him.

It had been her target for a long time. For a while Susanna brought a can of gas to school and started to put it in the Camaro, and the driver must have thought he had lucked out with a car with the best gas mileage in the world. But then one day Susanna started to siphon gas out of that guy's Camaro and he must have thought his luck had turned upside down.

Kevin walked out to his car that day, at lunch break, and saw it covered with Bologna and the birds pecking it up off the spoiled paint. Kevin clinched his fist and punched the car next to him, making a big crumpled dent. Another guy was in that other car but he decided it was better to say nothing in front of that muscle-bound, pissed off young hoodlum.

Susanna laughed from afar. It was the first time she actually got to see his reaction and she loved it. She wasn't sure who Kevin was, only that from the looks of his car he thought himself important. The thing was, Kevin saved most of his aggression for the boys at that school, knowing girls were usually better for other stuff. But that aggression was so strong that he had had a staring contest or two with Davy when Davy started to protect bully magnets. Yes, Susanna didn't know much about that young hoodlum.

Like Susanna, Kevin grew up poor and to try and feel a little rich he decided to sink all his hard earned money into a car--a car that made him look like a millionaire.

Susanna never told anyone what she did, 'cause she knew how fast rumors spread in that school, and she never told her family, either, just in case it leaked out of there. She mostly just sat in class replaying the whole incident in her mind, almost enjoying it like a cigar.

Well one day Susanna was rolling down the hall in her usual fashion and an awful thing happened that was one of the biggest shocks in her young life. That repulsive, repugnant, slimy, cowardly, prideful, God damn son of a bitch, waste of skin, spawn of Belphegor, Kevin pushed her to the ground and stomped on her skateboard, breaking it in half.

'You think that's funny?!' Kevin yelled, looming over her. 'I worked my ass off for that car! You know how much paint for that car cost?!'

Susanna crawled away, not knowing what to do. She had no idea how Kevin found out, and she couldn't believe that it made him so mad he'd push a girl to the ground. I guess that pathetic son of a bitch loved that car even more than any sense of decency.

Kevin grabbed Susanna by the arm and half lifted her off the ground.

'Let me go!' yelled Susanna. 'You're hurting me!' Susanna flailed and jerked, trying to get away with surprising strength, but it was no use. As strong as Susanna was, she couldn't do anything against that son of a bitch. She looked at the crowd gathering around her and couldn't believe how none of them were doing anything. Were they all afraid of Kevin that much? Did they all hate her that much?

Susanna kicked and bit Kevin but he threw her with his one arm and she prepared to be slammed against the lockers, but she wasn't. Susanna was caught in someone's arms. They were strong but gentle but still clenched with rage.

Davy gently put Susanna aside as he stepped forward and met that son of a bitch with his fist. Kevin was strong but Davy couldn't be stopped; he blocked every one of Kevin's punches and was immune to the pain, as strong

as those punches were. Davy soon punched Kevin enough to knock him off balance and Davy pushed him to the ground. Kevin tried to out-wrestle Davy but Davy bit his face, making it bleed, and then grabbed his neck with one hand and started pounding him with the other.

Davy never fought so hard in his life, and he started to realize he was filled with that same monster that was in Leroy that night, and there was nothing that could stop him except for a bullet.

Davy stood up and kicked Kevin for good measure. Kevin limped away like Quasimodo. For a second Davy thought he was going to kill that other boy, but he knew the son of a bitch was as good as dead.

Susanna grabbed Davy's hand and led him into the girls' bathroom and started wiping the blood from his face and hands with a wet paper towel. She opened her mouth several times like she was going to say something but she didn't; she only wiped him clean, looking sad.

Susanna grabbed another paper towel and reached for his face, but Davy grabbed her hand.

'You still think that was funny, Susanna?' said Davy.

'What, what do mean?' said Susanna.

'Susanna, maybe you were screwing with Kevin's car and maybe you weren't, but the point is everyone thinks you did,' said Davy.

'How did they know?' said Susanna.

'They just guessed. You have a reputation,' said Davy. 'Why do you do stuff like that?'

'I don't know,' said Susanna. And she really didn't.

'Susanna, not everyone is like Mr. Wilson,' said Davy. 'You need to stop doing stuff like this, or you're going to get hurt someday. I know we're not together anymore but I couldn't let something like that happen.' Susanna looked at him with an incredibly sad face.

'Thank you,' she said, just before she left, 'and you're right, we're not together.'

Days later, in the dead of night, Kevin parked his car and started to walk to the store. Suddenly he noticed two figures standing in front of him. As he got closer he noticed they didn't seem to have any plans of letting him pass and as he saw their faces, he recognized one from his school. It was Leroy. Leroy and his intimidating brother Calvin were waiting for him and Kevin got the sense he was in for some trouble. He saw them look behind him. He turned to see what they saw, and saw Clark. Clark, looking madder than a wolverine, walked out of the shadows, and blocked the other direction down the street. Kevin walked fast back to his car but stopped, seeing Bubba and Lenard walk out in front of it.

'We heard you tried to mess up our little cousin,' said Lenard.

'That made us think we should mess up your little face,' said Bubba.

Kevin turned around and started to run but only found the other Morgans blocking him. They chased him, trying to herd him back to Bubba

and Lenard. Kevin dodged them till he was caught by Calvin. Calvin spun him around till he was thrown into Clark and Leroy, who threw Kevin into Bubba and Lenard. Bubba and Lenard grabbed Kevin and threw him at his own car, denting it. Lenard held Kevin up as the other Morgans took turns using him as a punching bag. When Kevin looked bloody enough Bubba and Lenard dragged him to a dumpster and threw him in it.

Just before Bubba and Lenard closed the dumpster door they gave him a pep talk.

'If you tell anyone what happened here,' said Bubba, 'we're going to cut off your balls and make you eat them!'

'Yeah, and that will make you gay!' said Lenard.

'Not that there's anything necessarily wrong with that, if you're already gay,' said Bubba.

'Yeah, but you're probably not gay, so you won't like it!' said Lenard.

The Morgans left Kevin there, bloodied and humiliated.

Chapter 38

Days later Susanna was sitting on her bed with Sheena. A lot of times Sheena would come over and talk with Leroy. She'd then go talk with Susanna and after that, go kiss Leroy for a while before she went home. But that night while Sheena was talking with Susanna things ran a little deeper than the usual movie or Punk band.

'You know what I hate, about other girls?' said Sheena.

'What?' said Susanna.

'How so many of them want a guy just for his money,' said Sheena.

'Lots of evil people don't want you to know, but there's a big difference between the old rich and the new rich,' said Susanna. 'They're more different than a devil and an angel. The old rich can't make things. They choose not to; they steal what they want. And in order to steal, they usually have to kill. And in order to kill they usually have to dehumanize who they kill. To call them old is kind of a misnomer, 'cause we really don't know which kind of rich is older, and they're still very active, they're just always changing. They're always changing who they hate--sometimes it's the poor, sometimes it's the new rich, sometimes it's a religion, or a race, or a country, sometimes it's just people with glasses. It's all arbitrary who they hate, but they need to hate. They don't make things like the new rich do. They don't believe in that; they believe in violence. I could never be with a violent person.'

'I don't know if I'll marry a new rich, but I want to be one. I want to help people, I want to make things better. There's only one solution,' continued Susanna, 'we need a system where poverty is virtually eliminated. Where the idea of love for anything but love no longer exists. A world where no one has want.'

'Yeah,' said Sheena, 'that I'll be the day.' Susanna grimaced but then smiled. 'You know what's weird?' asked Sheena.

'What?' said Susanna.

'Someone asked me what I wanted to do when I grow up and I had no idea,' said Sheena. 'I've never even thought about it.'

'Never?' said Susanna.

'No,' said Sheena.

'At least you'll never be disappointed,' said Susanna.

'Susanna, what do you want to do?' said Sheena.

'I want a job like my dad has,' said Susanna, 'at least for a while.'

Then I want to get a job as a tutor or teacher or something.' This amazed Sheena.

'Why?' said Sheena. 'Susanna you have never met a teacher you liked, dude.'

'I'm good at math,' said Susanna, 'and math and science helped my dad so much that, if more people could just have that... More people could be free.'

'I think that's a good idea,' said Sheena.

Susanna started to feel a little too vulnerable and started to change the subject.

'That hellacious thug--I think his name was Kevin,' said Susanna, 'I heard he said that he was going to press charges against Davy but he was so scared after what my brothers and cousins did, I guess he thought better of it.'

'That's awesome,' said Sheena, 'the cops suck anyway... Did I ever tell you why my dad went to prison?'

'Uh... no,' said Susanna. She was almost shocked and unready for what Sheena wanted to talk about.

'My dad was a sleaze sometimes, but he wasn't a murderer. I remember waking up one day and I started watching cartoons, then I noticed how crazy my mom was acting. She ran into my room and threw a bunch of food and shelves from the refrigerator in my brother's and my closet. She kept looking outside and I decided to look outside too, just to see what she was looking at. There were cop cars all over the place, along with one guy with a big old rifle with a scope on it, a sniper.

'Eventually they broke down the door to our apartment and ran all over the place. Some of them even pointed guns at my brother. He was ten years old; I was eight.

'When they saw all the stuff from the fridge in our closet they put two and two together and figured my dad was hiding in the fridge. After kicking him a couple of times they hauled him away. Then they took my mother and then me and my brother.

'They put my dad in jail and kept me and my brother in the hands of a social worker for a day, deciding on whether we were ever going to see our parents again. They just let my mother go in an hour. They let her walk all the way home.

'My dad got convicted of murder. He was a sleaze sometimes, and he sold weed. That's all he did, though. He said it never hurt anyone, not like cocaine or something. And we needed the money. One day one of the guys he did business with pulled a gun on him. He wrestled the gun away from him and shot him. The judge said the guy he shot was defenseless without his gun, and my dad was guilty of murder, even though the guy tried to murder my dad a second before. Even though that guy murdered three guys before and he wanted to make my dad number four.

'My dad got sent to prison for defending himself. He was a sleaze but he wasn't a murderer. He hardly ever got in a fight with anyone. He never even carried or owned a gun.

'He cried. Not that he went to prison for it--my dad cried that he killed another man, even if that man didn't deserve to live.

'The cops caught my dad 'cause he paid taxes, had a driver's license, and had an address that a pizza guy could find. He was a soft target. If they

caught that psycho the first time he killed someone, just think how many lives could have been saved.

“That guy probably could have gotten a high priced lawyer just for the publicity of defending a serial killer. But my dad was a nobody. He killed a psycho defending his own life, so no one defended him except the idiot “the people” assigned. And nobody cares if he never hurt anyone; they just think he’s another drug dealer that should rot in prison.

‘Sometimes I think they want to make us all into outcast and criminals just so they can control us. Just so they can enslave us.

‘My dad went to prison for defending himself. Thanks to some robot cops and a robot judge, my dad went to prison because he was a nobody.’

“Wherever anyone is against his will, that is to him a prison,”
Susanna said. “That’s egregious. I don’t think I can top that.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Sheena, ‘that’s... I just feel like I’m unloading on you.’

‘No Sheena,’ said Susanna, ‘that’s important. I totally wish more people could hear that story.’

‘I go to meet him sometimes, even though he doesn’t want me to see him in that place,’ Sheena said. ‘One time I saw him and he looked so happy that I asked him what was going on and he said he was relieved that the whole prison rape thing was pretty much a myth. He talks about it all the time. He said once some gangster came up to him and said something like, “Hang loose blood, you tight, you don’t have to give it up. There’s too many po chi-mos giving it away.”’ The girls laughed.

‘I told Leroy what happened to my dad,’ said Sheena, ‘and I think he almost cried. But he didn’t ‘cause he wanted to be strong for me.’

‘Leroy,’ said Susanna.

‘You ever wondered what it would be like to never be hated?’ said Sheena.

‘I never thought of it like that,’ said Susanna.

‘I’ve never seen Leroy hate anyone,’ said Sheena. Susanna smiled, knowing it was true. ‘I want to experience that as much as I can. I used to just feel sorry for Leroy. I wanted to help him, but he also helped me. We help each other. You know,’ continued Sheena, ‘after we kissed the first time he proposed to me.’

‘What?!’ said Susanna. ‘That idiot.’

‘Yeah, I talked to him about it later and he just laughed,’ said Sheena, laughing. ‘But you know it freaked me out at first, but if he... if he asked me to marry him now I’d... I’d say yes.’

‘Oh Sheena,’ said Susanna.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Sheena.

‘No,’ said Susanna, ‘you shouldn’t apologize at all.’ The two girls sat together for a while. ‘Can I tell you something?’ said Susanna. ‘If you don’t mind me whining. It’s stupid.’

‘No,’ said Sheena, ‘what is it?’

‘I... I... I still love Davy,’ said Susanna.

'What!?' said Sheena. "Cause of what happened with that guy?"

Susanna took a deep breath. 'Oh no, it was even before that.'

'I don't even know why girls like Davy,' said Sheena. 'He's a chauvinist nerd that eats with his mouth open.'

'I don't know either,' said Susanna. 'It's just that he has the eyes of an Indian god, the arms of Apollo, skin like bronze, and a chest like Superman. Sometimes I wish he looked like a troll, 'cause I think maybe we'd be...'

'Oh my God,' said Sheena.

'I think of Davy when get up and before I go to sleep. When things go good for him I feel happy. When I think about my future I can only imagine it with him. When I close my eyes I see his face. When I feel sad or overwhelmed, I think about him and pretend we're still together and it gives me enough strength to make it through the day. I thought about telling him how I feel, but I can't. I know he's no good and we have no future and I don't want to get his hopes up. After how he hurt me, I'm still afraid of hurting him. Isn't that messed up?'

'Susanna,' said Sheena. "'I know he's no good and we have no future"-that's all you need to know. Forget that guy, Susanna, he'll hurt you no matter what, that's just the way he is.'

'What's a chi-mo?' said Danny.

'What are you doing?!' Susanna said, noticing Danny looking around the floor of her room.

'I lost my He-man. Have you seen him?' said Danny.

'No,' said Susanna, 'why did you even have him in here?'

'He was fighting your Barbie doll,' said Danny.

'Well you better find him soon,' said Susanna, 'before Shere Khan chews him up.'

'I know,' said Danny. 'He already chewed him a little. But I just pretend the teeth marks are battle damage. Oh, maybe that's it.' Danny ran out.

Danny ran into the living room and pulled open Shere Khan's mouth.

'What the hell are you doing?' said Sharon. 'Leave that poor damn thing alone.'

'I'm looking for He-man,' said Danny.

'He's in the fridge,' said Enos.

'Oh yeah,' said Danny, 'he was fighting the tobacco sauce.'

'My Tabasco sauce?' said Sharon.

Danny went and grabbed his He-man out of the refrigerator.

'Hey kid, I got a mission for He-man,' said Clark. He held up some wire cutters and clipped off the excess string from the guitar he was holding. 'I'm done putting new stings in Davy's guitar. Why don't you take it back to him?'

'OK,' said Danny.

'Just go there and back now,' said Clark.

Danny grabbed the guitar and walked out the door with it and his He-man. Danny walked down the street with He-man, grabbing the neck of the guitar like the wheel of a ship. Danny decided the guitar could fly for some reason.

Danny knocked on Davy's door.

'Oh, what's up dude?' said Davy opening the door.

'I got your guitar,' said Danny.

'Thank you,' said Davy as Danny handed him the thing.

'I just think, you should think, you should know,' said Danny, 'that I don't hate you anymore.'

'Thank you,' said Davy, smiling.

'Especially since Susanna doesn't,' said Danny.

'What?' said Davy.

'She says she loves you,' said Danny. 'She says it all the time.'

Davy's eyes grew wide. Danny ran back to his house, oblivious to what just happened.

Days later Davy saw Leroy and Sheena sitting at a table during lunch at school. He couldn't help himself; he sat down next to them.

'Hi,' said Leroy.

'What do you want?' said Sheena.

'I heard her say she still loves me,' said Davy.

'What the hell are you talking about?' said Sheena.

'Danny told me Susanna still loves me,' said Davy.

'Are you stupid?' said Sheena. 'Danny's probably just... he thinks it's a game.'

'Guys, is it true?' said Davy. 'Does she really still love me?'

'What? Do you think you guys still have a chance?' said Sheena.

'Forget it! You're not right for her, Davy, you never were. Don't you know why Susanna does things like what she did to Kevin's car?'

'Cause she's evil?' said Leroy.

'Cause she's just not very nice,' said Davy.

'No you idiots,' said Sheena, 'she's sensitive, she's very sensitive. She does stuff like that 'cause she knows that the only people that will put up with her are people that really love her. She can't have people tell her that they love her and not mean it, no matter what. She's one of the most sensitive persons I've ever met in my life.' Sheena was very perceptive and very caring.

'She doesn't like to talk about it,' said Leroy, 'but when she was a little girl, she would cry every time someone would die on TV.'

'What do mean? Every time?' said Davy.

'Every time someone on Gunsmoke would get shot, every time someone on Hawaii Five-O got shot, every time someone in the news would get shot,' said Leroy. 'Everyone, no matter how they died, whether it was real or not--she would cry over every death she saw on television, on the radio or

even in books. I never noticed how much death there is in everything. We took her to the Man with the Golden Gun, when it came out, and she cried so much that my mom emptied out a bag of popcorn and put it over Susanna's head.'

'Every time?' said Davy.

'Every time,' said Leroy. 'She stopped doing it when she was about six or seven, and she won't talk about it now, but that's what she was like.'

'Don't you get it, Davy?' said Sheena. 'You're the worst possible guy for her. She's extremely sensitive and you're an unfeeling, uncaring, selfish asshole. You did something to her that would break most normal girls to pieces, but for her you might as well have stabbed her. You ruined her, Davy! And you should just leave her the hell alone!'

'But we love each other,' said Davy. 'Are we just supposed to go the rest of our lives miserable and just run out the clock till we die?'

'You don't love her,' said Sheena. 'You're just being a selfish prick!'

'I think that's the one thing you're wrong about, Sheena,' said Davy, getting up. 'It's not wrong to want to be happy.'

Davy walked out of the lunch hall with Leroy and Sheena following him. Davy led them as he went to the oldest building in the school and to the stage, and behind it. He walked through the props and the taxidermied animals and climbed the ladder to the roof. Susanna was up there, just staring out over the city.

Davy stood behind her and Leroy and Sheena stood behind him.

'Susanna,' said Davy, 'I know you love me, and I have to tell you that I love you too. I know I... I want you to know.'

Susanna laughed. 'I don't love you,' she said, not even turning around. 'I was lying.'

'Susanna, why would you lie about that?' said Davy.

'Because I was playing a joke on you,' said Susanna, 'like I always do.'

'You're lying, Susanna,' said Davy. Susanna turned around.

'No Davy,' said Susanna. 'I never loved you, ever. It was all a lie. I was just playing with you. I never even liked you, ever. I don't love you, Davy, I never did. In fact I hate you. I HATE YOU DAVY! I hate you so much that if you got hit by a car I wouldn't care. In fact I'd go to your funeral just to laugh. I'd laugh my ass off. I wish you were dead, Davy. I wish you were dead right now. I wish someone would kill you! I wish you were dead! I'll... I'LL KILL YOU MYSELF!'

Susanna grabbed her skateboard and ran at Davy, swinging it with all the hate that little girl could muster. Sheena screamed, and Leroy leaped forward to get between them, but before he could, Davy caught the skateboard. Davy held the skateboard with both hands while Susanna struggled to free her weapon. She kicked him again and again, but it didn't work. Finally Susanna stopped and looked up into Davy's eyes. Her pale blue-grey eyes met his deep brown-orange eyes. Susanna's sneer turned to a

frown, and she started to blubber and then started to cry. They dropped the skateboard and she fell into Davy's arms, crying and shaking her head.

'Why, why, why, why, oh God, why?' she said over and over again. 'Why did you do it?'

They fell to their knees.

'Because I'm a selfish, stupid asshole,' said Davy. 'Susanna, even if I said I'm sorry with every breath I release for the rest of my life, I know it wouldn't be enough. I don't know if you want to be together again, I just want you to know that I love you too. I thought I knew what love was before, but I know now I never knew it before you. I know it was love 'cause it made me a better person, and it makes me still want to be a better person, whether we're together or not. I don't want your charity, I just want to give to you like you gave to me.'

'Susanna, it's up to you--you can let it go, or you can bring it back again.'

They held each other. Susanna's face was against Davy's chest as he looked into the distance, stroking her hair. Susanna then looked up at Davy's face and ran her fingers through his hair. She kissed him.

Susanna touched Davy's face and got up and walked away. She opened the trap door and climbed down the ladder and walked away, with the other three watching her.

The rest of the day no one saw Susanna. Leroy didn't even see her on the bus or when he got home. Hours later Clark got home and Sharon and Leroy met him and told him what had happened and that Susanna hadn't come home yet. But Leroy didn't tell his parents that his sister kissed that boy again. Clark wasn't especially scared; he knew he had a moody girl. He looked out the window and waited.

Soon Clark and Sharon were alone in the living room, and Clark almost missed a figure come to the door and open it.

'Susanna,' said Clark, 'is something going on?'

'Yeah,' said Susanna. She walked over to the couch and sat down next to her mother. Clark sat down next to her.

'Mom, Dad,' Susanna looked at them respectively. 'I kissed Davy again.'

'Oh no,' said Sharon.

'Susanna, that boy is not for you,' said Clark. He was on the verge of anger. 'You can't see that boy, Susanna. I never thought I had to make that rule, but you can't see that boy.'

'I... I'm in love with him,' said Susanna.

'Susanna, no, I'm telling you no,' said Clark, 'and that's all I want to hear about it, and that's all I'm going to hear about it.'

'Dad, I love him,' said Susanna.

'Susanna, that boy cheated on you. He's no good. You don't even know how no good he is,' said Clark. 'You don't love him, and you're not going to see him ever again.'

'Dad, he's changed,' said Susanna.

'GOD DAMN IT!' Clark stood up and snapped into a fit of rage. 'You don't love him Susanna, you're just a stupid kid; you don't know what love is!' Susanna shook her head.

'Dad, I'm sorry,' said Susanna.

'He's not right for you, girl! I've been too liberal with you. You're never going to see that boy again if I have to have us handcuffed together. He drinks! He does drugs! He sleeps around! And God knows what else!'

'Dad, he's changed,' said Susanna.

'Damn it! Susanna!' yelled Clark. 'People don't change.'

'Dad, why have you spent so much time with him if you thought he couldn't change?' said Susanna. 'I think you know he's changed. I knew it too, but I was too mad to admit it. Dad, we love each other. I think if I just let this go without a fight, it would be a sin.'

'A SIN!?' yelled Clark. He grabbed Susanna's hand and jerked her to her feet. She reached to hold his hand with her other hand but he just grabbed that hand, too. He clenched both her hands in his giant fist. 'IT WOULD BE A SIN IF I LET MY ONLY DAUGHTER BE SOME PLAYBOY'S WHORE OF THE MONTH! Susanna, you can't see him. And you don't love him. I want you to promise me you won't see him! And I want you to tell me you don't love him!'

'SUSANNA! Tell me you don't love him! Say it!' yelled Clark.

Susanna said nothing. She couldn't lie to her father and she couldn't disobey him either. She had no idea what to do. Clark drew back his other hand and with the back of it he struck her. Susanna's head was thrown back and she turned back to look at her father. A line of blood ran down her chin.

Susanna's face was blank. She didn't feel fear, anger or sadness. She had no emotion for this situation.

'Susanna!' Clark yelled again. He raised his hand again.

'CLARK!' yelled Sharon, standing up. Clark froze. Clark looked like he was in shock. His hands went limp and he released his daughter and sat down on the arm of the couch. His eyes were as wide as an owl's, and his pupils were smaller than the heads of needles.

Susanna looked at him, in a state that she never had seen before, and it terrified her. Seeing her father so defeated and confused, terrified her more, far more, then when he hit her.

Sharon grabbed her daughter's hand and had her sit down next to her. Sharon wiped the blood from her face with her bare hand.

'Clark... Clark,' said Sharon in her lilting tone she was known for, 'you've changed. You've changed a lot. You've changed so much I can't believe it.'

'I never noticed it at the time, but as I've looked back on it, when I first met you, you were really different. You weren't really a good person. You were lazy, you were stupid, you were selfish, and you were cruel. But you've changed, Clark. You've changed into one of the greatest men I've ever met. I didn't ask you to do it, I didn't expect you to do it, I didn't want it, I didn't even hope for it. But you changed all the same, and it's a miracle, it's a miracle, Clark. I know miracles happen 'cause I wake up next to one every day... when I'm not passed out on the couch.

'Susanna, the relationship between a father and his daughter is such a complicated one. There are few people that love each other so much but understand each other so little. What you two have managed to do is incredible, and I hope neither of you are so eager to throw it away.

'Susanna, remember when I told you that I had been with one person in my whole life?' Her daughter nodded. 'Your father can't say the same thing.'

'He didn't cheat on you, did he?' said Susanna.

'Not really,' said Sharon. 'There were several girls that were after your father the same time I was, and several he was after. One of them got to him before I did and she didn't really keep. He was just young and stupid; we all were.

'Susanna, the world isn't always perfect, especially the past--the past is horrible. You have to learn from it, but sometimes you just have to thank God it's over and be grateful.

'Susanna, Davy's going to change--people can't help but change--but if you're going to be with him he has to change for the better. And you're going to have to start all over again with him. And Susanna, you can't do it without your father's approval. You owe him that much, and more. And you're going to have to do it the way your father always told you to do it, do it slow and do it right.'

Sharon Morgan wasn't prone to many bouts of insight, but when those bouts did hit her, they hit like a flash flood in the desert.

'Dad,' said Susanna, 'I do love Davy. But if you don't want me to be with him I won't. Because I love you. I love you more than Davy. I love you more than any man in the world. And I forgive you Dad, I forgive you for hitting me. I love you Dad, and I'd rather die than disappoint you.'

Clark and Susanna stood up and looked each other in the eye. Susanna buried her face and put her hands on her father's chest. Clark put one arm around her head and one around her waist, and put his lips on top of her head.

One morning Susanna woke up to her clock. She slammed it without looking at it. She emerged from the covers in a button up shirt and shorts. She grabbed the leftover coke on her night stand and chugged it. She then turned on the radio and looked up something in a book she was thinking about. She looked into her closet and flipped through a bunch of clothes. She

held a shirt against her chest and a pair of overalls over that. She shrugged her shoulders and threw them over her arm.

Susanna walked down the hallway to the bathroom. She walked past Leroy and Danny waiting in line and opened the door. She threw Enos out and slammed the door. She turned the radio on in the bathroom and jumped in the shower and sang with the song that was playing. She then jumped out and grabbed a towel. She brushed her teeth while dancing to the radio.

Susanna burst from that bathroom clothed and walked back to her room as Danny, Enos and Leroy fought to get in the bathroom.

She stood in front of her mirror and put her makeup on lightly and nonchalantly. She brushed her hair and tied her two little characteristic pigtails, leaving most of her hair free. She gathered up her homework and checking it. When she was satisfied she put it in her back pack and carried it out to the living room and put it next to the front door.

She sat at the dinner table and ate breakfast with her parents and her brothers, even Calvin, who was visiting. They had Cheerio's and potato chips.

The front door of the Morgan house opened and Danny and Enos ran out down the street, joining Roni, late for the bus. Leroy walked out of the door and then Susanna, who hugged her father and kissed her mother in the doorway. Susanna and Leroy walked to end of the driveway, and Leroy met Sheena there.

Susanna stood on the edge of the street and looked over at the Solomon house. She saw Davy walk out and stop on the sidewalk. Davy turned and he looked at her and she looked at him. Their eyes met, and at first their faces looked sad and happy at the same time, until they only looked happy, and they smiled. She blew a bubble with her gum.

Susanna ran at Davy with all her strength and jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Davy held her legs with each hand, and Susanna looked down on him, smiling, and they kissed.

Just as that happened, Kanokwan looked out her door and looked over to see Clark, Sharon, Calvin and Shere Khan looking out their door. They smiled at each other and then at Susanna and Davy, because they knew they were all family.

Davy and Susanna walked down the sidewalk hand in hand, talking freely. From that day on they were always with each other and no one else. They helped each other, they gave each other strength, they gave each other comfort, they gave each other insight, they gave each other wisdom, and they gave each other love. Together they could do anything. Together they were unstoppable. And if you have to know, they didn't completely wait till they were married, but they got pretty damn close, well kinda.

They were in love, and they loved each other till the day one of them died, and even after that. They loved each other until the day both of them died and maybe even after that. They were in love. They are in love.

Chapter 39

Sometime after that the Solomons and the Morgans drove to Los Angeles and to Thai town and did it just in time for the holiday of Songkran. They parked in a parking lot and walked to the center of their destination. Every restaurant was open for business, with crowds of people going in and out. Some teenagers were dressed up as clowns or as super heroes and some monks were covered with chalk. As the crowd got thicker, men and women started spraying the crowd with hoses and dowsing people with buckets of water. Someone handed Danny a water pistol and he started to run around with some other kids as they squirted one another.

In the middle of the street there was a crowd of people dancing to Safety Dance, blaring out of speakers. Everyone was soaking wet, and Davy and the Morgan kids joined the dance, as the parents stood on the sidewalk. In the center of the crowd was a big pickup truck and on top of it were a bunch of soaking wet, pretty girls all dancing. Davy picked up Susanna as she laughed and he put her up on top of the truck. Susanna got sprayed with a hose and she started to dance with the other girls.

Clark looked at his daughter and his new son and the new world they were a part of, and it made Clark think of the world he came from. As I said before, Clark's parents didn't like him going to Vietnam, and he wasn't drafted, so you might even wonder why he would even do such a thing. The thing was, Clark grew up in a world where almost every grown man, including most of his teachers, were war heroes and they almost all said they killed a Nazi. And as strong as the influence of his parents was, the influence of the culture still could pull him away every so often, and that war was one those every so oftens. Clark worked hard to make sure his kids weren't taken in by the new culture 'cause he knew how easy it was to fall for its stories.

Clark also went to war 'cause he loved his country as much as he loved his family and he hated the communists almost as much as he hated the devil. But unlike the Nazis, the communists were still out there, still committing murder after murder, some they were conscious of and some they weren't. But maybe a war wasn't the way the communists were going to be stopped.

In a way Clark regretted the war. He didn't so much regret his service; he was proud, but he hated that it had to happen in the first place. In a way, he regretted the war. And of course the Nazis had to be stopped, but maybe the country we became to stop them was better left in the past. Maybe the way to stop the communists wasn't to go to the four corners of the earth and shoot everything that moved. 'Cause Clark started to think that war hurt a lot more people than the soldiers who died on the battle field.

Clark remembered being told as a child in school that WWII ended the Great Depression, but Clark knew now that that had to be another lie. When he came home from Vietnam he experienced firsthand that war didn't create wealth, it created poverty, War created poverty after Vietnam, WWI,

the Civil War and even after the American Revolution. And God only knows how many more casualties that poverty caused. His own family was oppressed by a war that they never saw.

Speaking of the Civil War, Clark made it a point to vote in every election there was, but when he looked at the map of the national election they played on the news, most of the time, how the states divided looked a lot like a map of the Civil War. Americans were still hating each other a hundred years or so after that horrible war. In fact, Clark even noticed in his own life time that the North and South decided to switch parties. It wasn't even about slavery anymore; anything would do. Maybe even what end you should open your egg from.

Now of course, slavery had to be stopped, but that was the price we paid. And that same kind of hate and poverty was the residue left by any war, righteous or not, so we better make sure it was worth it.

Now you might think with thoughts like these that Clark was some kind of hippie, but you would be wrong. Clark certainly was not a hippie; in fact, he beat the hell out of a couple of hippies when he was growing up.

But even though Clark didn't like hippies, he now understood that all they really wanted to do was make the world a better place, and that's all he wanted to do when he went to Vietnam. But all the armies of the world with all their guns, and all the hippies in the world with all their... whatever, just couldn't cut it. Maybe they both would have done better if they decided to use wealth instead of fight against it.

Clark then thought about his boss and all the people he employed from all over the world and all the people his co-workers helped employ. And all the lives that were made easier by him just trying to make something better than it was a year ago. By making technology better and cheaper and more efficient than it used to be. If that man could spread that much peace and freedom in this country, just imagine how much he could spread in others, and he was only one of many.

It was then that Clark had a thought that might sound like one of the most blasphemous things that you could ever hear, but Clark thought it all the same. He thought that whoever said "money doesn't buy happiness," was never poor, or was an idiot, or a liar. 'Cause the more Clark thought about it, the more he thought money was just a kind of freedom. And if freedom doesn't make you happy, then you either don't have a brain in your head or a heart in your chest. It was that freedom that gave Clark the ability to provide for his family and even to those that weren't a part of his family when he first moved to Los Fronteriza. It gave the employees of the Queen Cali the freedom to stand up for themselves, it gave Gary the freedom to not buy beer for Davy, it gave Sheena's mother the freedom to spend more time with her children, it gave Cletus the freedom to pay back his brother, and it gave Clark's coworkers the freedom to embrace their culture, whether native, mainstream, foreign, or counter. It gave them all the freedom to live the way they wanted.

It's often said that money changes people, but the Morgans turned that on its head. The Morgans changed money.

And yes, it is true that money doesn't buy love, but the Morgans most certainly had that already. The Morgans already had love, only now they had more opportunity to express it. They were one of the most loving, most moral, most caring families you could ever meet. And that love, and that morality made them survive the perils of success the same way they survived all the other adversities they faced. The Morgans were a strong family.

Now one time Susanna told Clark that birds had evolved from dinosaurs, and at first that didn't make any sense to Clark. How could the biggest, toughest, meanest monsters that ever lived, that weren't afraid of anything except each other, turn into the meekest, cutest, most harmless little creatures that you could ever meet? But then he remembered his Bible and he remembered "the meek shall inherit the earth." And Clark realized there was never a day he went without seeing a bird. And when he was starving to death or fighting for his life, somehow they seemed immune and would just go about their business, singing their happy little heads off. And why did they fly? What was it they were trying to get up there? Maybe it was just as simple as freedom, and that freedom gave them the strength to live a life more fruitful and bountiful than they ever had when they were big scaly monsters. Their freedom made them prosper and their prosperity gave them freedom--it was one of those positive feedback loops. The meek shall inherit the earth.

Maybe the monster we became to fight the Nazis needed to become meeker and freer. And the kinds of people it was going to take to make it that way were people like Clark Morgan's boss, a meek peaceful, free man, who had no greater goal than to go to work that morning and do a good job. Maybe he wouldn't make a good president, maybe he wasn't even conscious of what he was doing, and maybe he wouldn't always be on the right side, but maybe overall, he could make this world a better place, just by going to work every day. Maybe he could help end poverty forever.

Clark then looked up at the sky and knew that he was going to do everything he could to help that man, and right then and there Clark swore to God that he could feel something moving around inside his head.

...
the end

PS.

Now maybe the Morgans had some important life lesson to give or maybe they were just a guilty pleasure.

Maybe the Morgans seemed like some completely relatable family to you, or maybe they seemed like some kind of freak show.

And I wonder if I'm even the right person to tell their story, and I'm sure I'm not, but I think the world is better with it than without it, no matter who tells it.

Good bye...