Montage from Grade Three

"It must be the work of something sinister, something far worse than Jesus. I wouldn't have thought him capable of it." That was my father talking.

"Lord God strike you down for saying such a thing!" That was my grandmother. She wasn't old, just older than I was. At least, that's what I held to be true, and if it wasn't, then why should I worry about a little thing like that.

"Dad, for pity sake, don't go riling up the dinner table before the pudding's served." That was my mother. She didn't often talk, except about pudding, and even then it was in a low voice.

"I hope to God pudding's the least of our worries come Sunday," said my father harshly. "And I hope to God it's not tapioca. I loathe tapioca."

"We had tapioca on Thursday, that's when we always have tapioca," insisted my mother patiently. "Today it's chocolate because today was the day our little Davy first arrived." She was talking about my sister, and why my sister was named Mary David I'll never know.

My father claimed to be Catholic, but the last thing he'd ever said that had any remote connection to the church had been something about Judas Priest. My mother humored him, but my grandmother was hell-bent against him and all his heathen ways, and she would be hell-bent against anyone calling her hell-bent about anything too. She went to the Eighth Partially-Deform Presbo-piscipal Church in a shack outside of town. My mother wouldn't let her take me to the services, even though I wanted to see them. They had sounded fun at first, until my mother whispered to me that they were unwholesome, and then I just wanted to go because I was too young to know about pornography.

Davy, my sister, hadn't been born; she'd arrived, just as my mother had said, on a Friday at our doorstep in a shoebox covered in packing tape and grass clippings. But we all called her family, and it seemed to make her happy. At the moment she was dumping strained peas onto my plate with a cunning that belied her small stature. My sister hated strained peas, more than she hated strained asparagus or strained beets. I hated them too, but since my mother had given up on my diet at a fairly early age, I didn't have to eat them.

"Tapioca's the turds of the Devil, that it is," muttered my grandmother. She loved tapioca, but apparently her church had told her it was a sin, so she wouldn't eat it.

My father didn't seem inclined to continue his previous statement, but I was curious, so I asked, "What's the work of something sinister Dad?"

My father looked as though he'd been struck by lightning for a moment, then he remembered what I was talking about and said, "It's the damned electrical railway, that's what!"

"Language!" shouted my grandmother, and she backhanded my father with a force coming, I supposed, from years of clean living, or possibly from God, whom I'd never met but seemed rather powerful to hear people talk. My father fell backwards out of his chair. My mother went to get the pudding. My sister kept putting strained peas on my plate.

"What's wrong with the electric railway Dad?" I asked as soon as he'd risen, shaken himself a little, patted a few things to make sure nothing was out of place, and so on. "Mrs. Lee says that one day there'll be electric rails all over the world, taking people from this place to that. It sounds marvelous."

"But that's just the thing," my father retorted. "It's electric! How am I supposed to feed my children if they shut down the coal mine? I've been working my way up through the ranks, and any day now they may make me shift boss, but if they close the company what'll I do? What'll everyone in this town do?" He seemed worn out by this last thought and cradled his head in his hands.

"Pudding's ready," said my mother. She placed before each of us a bowl filled with

chocolate pudding. "Now eat up and let's have no more of this worrying. Things will look all right once you've had your pudding."

The rest of my family could find no argument in this, and so the conversation stopped as suddenly as it started and we all began to fill our mouths with pudding.

"I don't understand this fraction stuff," said Mullins stupidly. "It's like there's a problem with the numbers and to fix it, they made a bunch of new numbers by sticking two together. It makes no sense."

"It's just like pieces of pie," said Lynne with a condescension in her voice, "The bottom number says how many pieces we cut the pie into, and the top number is how many pieces of that pie we have."

"Seems to me that if we cut the pie, we should have the whole thing," said Mullins. He was seated on the wall which ran low around the park beside the school before rising and darting off for parts unknown. Mullins was actually named Henry, but we thought he was fat and stupid, so we called him Mullins because it sounded better. No one could remember exactly who started calling him that; it just sort of happened. In retrospect, I imagine we were right about the Mullins, although wrong about the fat and stupid, since he wasn't terribly fat and fractions, as with a lot of life lessons you learn in school, really don't make any sense. But at the time, Mullins was fat and stupid.

"It's a metaphorical pie," I said. I was an odd child that way.

"What's metafortical?" asked Lynne, because while she thought she knew it all, she really knew very little.

"Why are we talking about school," said Tip. He was the one tossing a baseball into the air every few seconds and then catching it. He always caught the ball, no matter what he seemed to be doing at the time. If it was in the air near him, he would catch it. At the time we thought this quite amazing, although he dropped the ball nearly as many times as we did, on average. He just simply had more overall catches to his credit.

"Is it lunch yet? I'm starved." Mullins didn't help himself in the fat department by being the one always obsessed with food. He ate Twinkees out of his pockets, he sold toys to buy Mars bars, he promised extravagant favors to anyone with extra sandwiches at lunch. I didn't like food, so I didn't understand him.

"It's only recess, stupid," said Tip. Tip was named Tip because we thought he was strong and smart, so we called him Tip, because his name was Tipper. His parents were both dead, and he'd been raised by his mildly-retarded uncle who had no idea which names were for women and which for men, and as a result Stanley Charles Berkowitz became Tipper Berkowitz. We never asked him what his middle name was. We didn't know Tipper was a girl's name either.

I was in love with Lynne. She was blonde, tall, and quite well developed for her age, and so she had many admirers. She was also shallow, very nearly the stupidest person I'd ever met, and obsessed with her breasts, so most people admired her from a distance, not wanting to get sucked into her vortex of doom. I, on the other hand, had thrown myself into it willingly, and as a result she wanted nothing to do with me.

"Tip, come on, let's go," pleaded Lynne. She was in love with Rock Hudson, but Tip was as close as she was likely to get, so her love rubbed off on him. He, for his part, was only interested in that ball. I secretly wanted to kill Tip, eat his heart like in a book I'd once read, and gain his power, so I could seduce and ravish the lovely Lynne. I was too young to know exactly what to do with Lynne had I seduced her, but ravish sounded as good an activity as any, and I

was quite sure it would be enjoyable. I was a very odd child.

Tip and Lynne went off, probably to find somewhere where Tip could throw the ball around with others and Lynne could stare longingly at him. Mullins had already wandered off looking for food. I was left alone, sitting on the wall, where I'd been sitting when the whole fractions discussion began. I was on Chapter Eleven of *Tales of Captain Blood*, and he was just about to kill the scurvy dog who'd stolen something, I couldn't remember exactly what. But then, as I knew even back then, it didn't matter; pirates would be pirates no matter what the circumstances might be.

"Today in China the premier announced that he was transferring further troops to the border with Russia to prevent any refugees from getting into the country," said the TV announcer in a bored voice. I only watched the news because it was on and my father didn't let anyone leave the room if the television was showing something other than a public service announcement. He claimed the latter were secret codes to all the spies in the world and if you figured out the code, they'd have to kill you. My grandmother said he was a sinner for even believing in spies. My mother made pudding. My sister was young enough to buy it; she faithfully turned her head away from the TV whenever one would come on.

"Dad, why are there refugees from Russia?" I asked, hoping he might know the answer. He watched much more television than I did, so I naturally assumed he must be better informed. As it turns out, I was right, but for the wrong reasons.

"Beats me," he grumbled. "Probably has something to do with famine or war or instability or something. Maybe those Russians just prefer life in China."

"Well why doesn't China want them?"

"Son, would you want thousands of starving diseased foreigners living in your bedroom?" I didn't respond; secretly the idea sounded rather exciting, but I knew it was physically impossible, even if everyone held their breath. "I thought not," my father continued, taking my silence as agreement. "So why should the Chinese want them any more than you do?"

"Godless heathens the lot of them," growled my grandmother. My sister was drawing a complicated diagram on a napkin with a blue crayon. Sometimes I wondered about Davy, but no one else seemed to, so I usually just let her alone. Still, it was somewhat peculiar, and so was she.

"Don't go bringing God into it," said my father resolutely. "God's got nothing to do with it. The Chinese don't believe in God, and the Russians do it backwards, or so I'm told, so why should anyone care?"

"How do you mean, do it backwards?" I asked. I was too young to understand double-entendres, or else I might just have laughed. As it was, I was curious. "Do you mean the opposite of the Chinese? Does God not believe in them?"

"Don't be silly," said my father, laughing out loud. "I meant they do religion backwards. We're Christian, and they're backwards Christian, Orthodox I think they call it. We both believe the same things, but they do it backwards."

"I most certainly do not believe in the same things as those Commie-lovers," insisted my grandmother.

"Well they say we do, and I'm pretty sure we say they do, so what's there to argue about?" My father was trying to diffuse the situation.

I didn't listen to my grandmother's reply, because I was thinking about what I'd said earlier, even if it was wrong. What if God stopped believing in me? The thought swirled around

my cortex and then dived into the medulla oblongata, which is where I felt certain the subconscious must have an office of some kind. It got filed under Worries and put in an inbox somewhere, and I stopped thinking about it just in time to catch the tail end of my father's reply, which wasn't very interesting at all.

"Chapter 3: The Devil's Bog," I read aloud, and aside from a brief flutter of excitement at the mention of the Devil, all was deathly still. I was just about to break the silence with words of excitement when my teacher beat me to the punch.

"That's quite enough of that," said Mrs. Lee. At that time we always called the teachers "Missus," rather than "Miss" even though very few of them were married. It just seemed odd to call someone older than your mother, "Miss." Mrs. Lee was definitely not married, for reasons which whirled around the rumor mill but had very little to do with the truth. So I suppose one could say that she wasn't married for none of those reasons. At the time, we thought she was terribly old, when in fact she was young and had just had a hard life. Her glasses were thick and distorted her eyes so you could never tell exactly where she was looking.

Secretly, she fancied herself a romantic heroine, tossed on this shore by an ill wind. Her parents had been missionaries in China before her birth, but the Lee was pure coincidence. She wasn't overly fat or overly skinny, ugly or pretty, smart or stupid. In fact, she was that most unfortunate of people: someone who will never be a romantic heroine because they're just too nondescript. This tragedy had certainly led to her profession, an occupation rife with tragedy.

At the moment she was trying to teach us the fours, but that was wishful thinking. Most of us were still in the twos. One might suppose that getting the twos would make the fours that much easier, but then one would obviously have never gone to school a day in one's life. I was on fractions, but I pretended for Mrs. Lee's sake. Even when she did things like the thing she was about to do, I still tried to be kind to her.

"Jeffrey, what on earth are you reading? I said you should do a book report on a book you'd read from the library, not some pulp paperback!" Mrs. Lee was in high dudgeon, and I knew I would be lucky to get away with the book still in my possession.

"But I did read it," I offered. "I read the whole thing. It's fascinating, all about pirates and shipwrecks..."

"Never mind what it's about," Mrs. Lee cut me off. "I don't think it's appropriate material for class presentation. Let's move on to the next presenter... Raul, that's you."

She was wrong. Not just about the book either; Raul was in fact not next in line. He was way at the end, because so few people had last names like Ximenez. I knew he shared the name of a villain from the Spanish Inquisition, but if so, the blood had run very thin in Raul. His father was the custodian at the school. No one ever saw his mother; it was whispered that perhaps she was dead or back in the place they'd come from. If anyone had bothered to ask Raul, he could have told them that his mother was quite well, that they'd come from Ohio, and that the reason she was never seen was because she didn't speak good English, so she let her husband and son do most of the talking.

Raul didn't mind being called next though. He loved to talk. The problem was, he talked about all the wrong things. Apparently his father was rather profane at the dinner table, for Raul would pepper his mildly-accented English with streams of curses which made even the strongest among us blush. He had quite the talent for it in fact; he invented new curses when he had used up the old, and he was scatological, obscene, and profane without any particular malice of forethought. I wondered, as I closed the book and returned to my desk, which book he'd read.

“I heard that Tommy Morton had a nosebleed in class today that was so bad, he had to go to the nurse's and Mr. Ximenez had to bring in the sawdust to soak up the blood,” said Lester in a low conspiratorial voice. Lester was my next-door neighbor, and he heard many things, few of them true. He was two or three years older than I, I forget which, and he lorded this fact over me even though I knew for a fact he was bluffing and in fact he was only one and a half years older than me. Also, he was an idiot. Still, fooling around with him beat going inside and listening to my grandmother rant and rave at her television preacher.

My grandmother’s television preacher was a peculiar man named Brother Leon, and he seemed quite convinced that the end of the world was coming and there was nothing we could do about it. I’d only watched the show once, which was more than enough. Fat balding sweaty little men with strange twangs in their voices that seem to disappear and reappear as the mood strikes are a dime a dozen; at least, that’s what they should be worth. I’m not actually sure whether there were any other men like Brother Leon, but I’d never been to one of my grandmother’s Revivals, so I couldn’t be sure.

“He was crying like a stuck pig,” continued Lester in a tone of voice that made him sound as if he felt Tommy Morton might just as well put on a dress and pee sitting down. I just nodded. I imagined that if Tommy Morton really had had a nosebleed as bad as Lester said, he would probably have every right to cry. I cried myself sometimes, though I tried not to do it around other people. Especially not around Lester.

“You’re full of it,” I said, just to keep Lester happy. I knew that I had to disbelieve what he said, otherwise he wouldn’t have any fun at all.

“Scout’s honor,” he declared forthrightly, which he could do, never having been a Scout. His parents were Jewish and the Scouts had a problem with that for some reason. I didn’t see why. Lester didn’t look Jewish to me, and he certainly didn’t sound Jewish. He was tall, lanky, with a shock of red hair, lots of freckles and a nasal voice which, truth be told, sounded much more twangy than Brother Leon’s ever did. But then I wasn’t in the Scouts either, so I couldn’t say. My grandmother declared that the Scouts were tools of Satan, but that wouldn’t have stopped me. What stopped me was the fact that the Scouts were full of people who deserved to be Scouts, and I didn’t feel I deserved it.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t clean, or trustworthy, or helpful, or any of those other things one had to be. It wasn’t even that I didn’t believe in God, because I was too young to be an Atheist. I think there’s some sort of rule about that. It was that I viewed the Scouts as a punishment meted out to those who deserved it, and I hadn’t done anything worth punishing, at least not that anyone knew. The only things I ever got in trouble for were reading in the wrong places and the wrong times, and that was hardly cause to be exiled to the Scouts. I’d heard things from people who were in the Scouts, things which, while they made it sound quite nice, chilled me to the bone. I had no desire to tie things, or fish, or carve things. I viewed it as some kind of bizarre forced-labor camp for children.

I let the Scout comment slide. “Did you bring the book?” I asked anxiously. Lester wasn’t just my next-door neighbor; he was my supplier. He somehow could get hold of the books they didn’t sell children, the kind with adventure and small print and large words. I suppose they probably encouraged various bad habits, but I was bored with Dick and Jane before I left diapers.

“Yeah,” said Lester conspiratorially. “But it’s going to cost you extra. I had a tough time getting it.”

I thought for a moment. How much extra was I willing to pay for Part Seven of the *Saga of the Dark Knights*. It was the latest in the series, and I could feel it calling to me from the book bag I knew must contain it. "How much extra?" I asked warily.

"Buck fifty." He was playing hard-to-get, trying to make me pay that ridiculous price. I'd already forked over two months of allowance money, and a dollar and fifty cents was serious scratch.

"Fifty." I opened far too low, just to make him understand that I wasn't going to be yanked around on this one. He sneered.

"Buck twenty-five." I sneered back.

"Seventy-five."

"A buck."

"That's another month's allowance." Lester didn't seem to understand the harsh realities of the situation. My allowance per week was twenty-five cents, and that had to go a long way. There was candy to be bought, comics to get from kids who didn't want them anymore, and of course, the next book I'd be sure to need. I knew that if I gave Lester the last of my liquid cash I would have to pursue my secondary plan: to get my mother to take me to the library. That would be hard. Too hard.

"Tough noodles, Jer. Three bucks is my final price for the book. It's not easy to get these things." Actually, it was quite easy; Lester's father would buy them for Lester, because Lester's father, unlike mine, believed that nothing was inappropriate. At the time I couldn't see why my own father wouldn't buy these books for me, but that understanding is reserved for a time when you no longer remember what it was like to be on the other side of the equation, like so many things about getting older.

Lester called me Jer even though he knew I hated it because he was trying to make me lose my cool. My name wasn't Jer, or Jeff, or even Jeffrey, although that's what it said on my birth certificate. My name was a mystery to one and all, a mystery that I refused to share, and let the foolish world go on calling me the wrong name. At some point, I assumed, I would have to tell someone my real name, even if it was only to have the proper name to put on my tombstone, but I was waiting until it felt right.

I refused to give in to his torture. "I can only spare seventy-five, otherwise I won't be able to pay you for the next one until..." I counted off the months in my head. "...November." This was a lie and we both knew it. Even if I gave him seventy-five, I still wouldn't have the cash to buy another until November. But Lester finally decided that continued custom was better than immediate cash-flow, and since he realized nothing but profit on each of these deals, he could afford to be magnanimous.

"Okay, fine, but I'm doing you a favor," he said, but I wasn't listening. I was already getting out my nickels and dimes and the occasional quarter and counting through them. I was too young to have paper money, or so my parents told me. In reality, if I'd wanted to, I could have gone to the bank and changed all the coinage into bills quite easily, except I wasn't allowed to walk that far.

I passed over the money and he passed over the book. It was pristine, untouched by human eyes. The cover featured a large knight holding a sword over a wailing maiden. Had I been a bit older, I would have noticed that the maiden was more out of than in her clothes, but I just looked at the whole picture and smiled. This one was going to be the best yet, I could just feel it.

“Yet another ice storm cut power to much of the North East, and rescuers are out in the hundreds looking for missing people.” The TV announcer seemed rather pleased with this. I guess it was because he wasn’t in the North East, but it could have been that he liked ice; I wasn’t sure.

“Haha, those poor bastards are really getting it this year,” crowed my father with a mixture of glee and sorrow. He was schadenfreude personified, and he continued so to be until my grandmother whacked him in the back of the head.

“Language!” she bellowed, and my father’s eyes crossed once, then uncrossed and returned to the television screen.

Davy was lying on her back on the floor in a diaper and a little shirt which had a sports team’s name on it. She couldn’t walk yet, and she usually didn’t bother to crawl anywhere unless she ran out of paper or crayon. Then she would scuttle off to some secret stash, retrieve the requisite item, and continue diagramming away, happy as a clam. Sometimes, when my mother or my father did something particularly amusing, she and I would share a look and then she would chortle in a tiny voice, which always made me laugh, which always made my parents glare at me. She didn’t do it maliciously; she was just better at controlling her amusement.

At the moment my father’s eyes uncrossed, Davy was drawing in a blue crayon which had been worn down to a nub. She sensed without looking that my father was looking in her direction and kicked her legs once or twice and made noises demanding to be picked up. My father, glad for the excuse to get away from my grandmother before she committed any more mayhem, saw this and went over and hoisted her gurgling form onto his shoulder and bounced her while he continued to watch the news.

It seemed odd to have a birthday party for someone who hadn’t been born, but my parents insisted. They said I was silly, that she had been born, just not in our house. I looked at Davy, and she looked at me, and I knew that she knew what I was thinking. She didn’t do anything, but she made it quite plain that I was right, but that we should both go along with it for my parents’ sake. So I went along with it.

“Now what kind of cake should we have?” asked my mother, even though she wanted to serve pudding. No one knew exactly why my mother was so obsessed with pudding, but no one questioned it. Pudding was just something that you ate and forgot about, or ate and enjoyed, if you happened to like that night’s pudding. My father, however, was of the opinion that, at least at birthdays, we should have cake, so for everyone’s birthday but my mother’s, we had cake. On my mother’s birthday, we had the pudding that no one would eat. It was a pudding which dared not speak its name. It lurked in the recesses of all our thoughts, and its anticipation filled my mother with joy. But her birthday wasn’t anywhere near my sister’s, so she had to be content to make cake.

“Can we have pineapple upside-down cake?” I asked hopefully. Pineapple upside-down cake was my favorite. I’d read about it once in a magazine, and every year I made my mother make me one on my birthday. The great advantage to having a birthday cake that you like and no one else does is that you get to eat it all, and if you enjoy that hypothetical cake as much as I enjoyed pineapple upside-down cake, then that is a great advantage indeed.

“Of course we’re not having pineapple upside-down cake,” said my mother sharply. “It’s Davy’s party, not yours.”

“What about strawberry shortcake?” my father asked.

“Shortcake’s not a proper cake,” said my grandmother, uncharacteristically not injecting

religion into the discussion. "It's not a cake if it's got another word attached to it."

"We could just have pudding," said my mother.

"We've been over this," said my father, putting a forkful of peas into his mouth. We always talked family business at dinner, because my mother claimed it was the only time when we could be civil. Personally I didn't think we were ever civil, but I kept that to myself. "It's not right to have pudding for a birthday. It's not called a birthday pudding, it's called a birthday cake. Besides," he said, pausing to take a sip of water, "it's too hard to get the candles to stand in the pudding. We tried, remember."

My mother laughed at that, and so did my father. It was a happy memory for them, and I wished I knew what it was they were talking about. Had I known I would probably have been disappointed, but I didn't, so I wasn't. "You're right," she said finally, "but then what cake shall we have?"

"We could have a store-bought one," my father said, even though he knew what the response would be.

My grandmother had just taken a large bite of her catfish and so was unable to immediately leap into the breach, but she chewed and swallowed rather rapidly and then said accusingly, "Store-bought! Store-bought! You know what they do in those stores, don't you? All those cakes, waiting to be delivered. They spit in them. It's disgusting, filthy, awful. The Reverend said so, and I agree with him." This last was a bit redundant, as there was nothing the Reverend said with which my grandmother didn't agree.

"Okay, fine, no store-bought cakes," said my mother, giving in quickly to stem the tide.

"Why don't we ask Davy what she wants?" I asked. No one seemed to hear; they were all deep in thought. Davy was busy putting strained carrot on my plate, but she cocked an eyebrow at me as if to ask what I was thinking. I wasn't thinking, I suppose, but at the time, it seemed perfectly reasonable.

"We could have an almond cake," posited my mother.

"What if she's allergic to almonds? We've never had them before." My father made a good point, even though he was wrong. We'd had almonds three times since Davy had arrived, but it hardly mattered, since Davy never ate the food we ate anyway.

"That's the trouble with young people, always allergic to this and that," muttered my grandmother. "In my day, you ate them and shut up about it. Wasn't any time for bellyaching and bilge-swilling." How my grandmother had ever heard a term like bilge-swilling I didn't know, but it certainly was an odd one. I'd only ever heard of the bilge through my adventures with Captain Blood, or possibly Rum, or maybe a Beard of some color or other. They were all in various series, and sometimes I suspected that they were all written by the same person who just changed the names around to make people think there was more to it than there really was.

"Well then how about a carrot cake?" suggested my mother. "We know she can eat carrots." This was true, although she didn't eat many, most of them ending up on my plate. I often wondered exactly what it was she ate to stay alive.

"I hate carrot cake and you know it," said my father.

"It's not your party, it's Davy's," said my mother.

"If you ask me, it's ridiculous to let these children run around wearing short pants well after they get too old for that nonsense," said my grandmother, having made the logical leap from allergies to pants when none of us were paying attention.

"Why don't we ask Davy what she wants?" I asked again, very reasonably I thought.

"What if I'm allergic to carrots?" said my father.

"Then you won't eat any of the cake," said my mother.

"Prancing around dressed up like Lord Fauntleroy," muttered my grandmother.

Davy continued to move carrots. She seemed not to care about what cake she got, although I was sure she appreciated my efforts on her behalf.

Mr. Ximenez stopped me in the hall after school. "My boy Raul, he told me a lot about you," he said, in a tone which could mean many things. I hoped it didn't mean something bad. I didn't know what I could possibly have done to Raul; everyone liked him, and very few people liked me more than him.

"Oh, really," I said, thinking that perhaps this was the best answer, but guessing it wasn't.

"Yes, he said you are a smart kiddo," said Mr. Ximenez, and I relaxed a little. It wasn't violence in the cards that day. I allowed myself to listen to his accent, trying to guess what pirate he would most sound like. Or possibly a knight, a knight of old Spanish nobility. In reality, Mr. Ximenez had a very slight accent because his parents had been in America for most of his life, and he had only gotten back to Puerto Rico after he'd already been Anglified, as his father called it. There he'd met and married the beautiful Marie Contreblanc, whose parents were both descendants of slaves owned by the French. She spoke French, he spoke Spanish, and so Raul's accent was interesting to say the least. I didn't know all that of course, so Mr. Ximenez became a legendary knight Templar for a moment before he spoke again.

"I was wondering," he said, "if maybe, sometime after school maybe, you could help Raul with his studies, just for a little while." Seeing the look in my eyes and misinterpreting it entirely, he forged on. "I could bring sweets from my home for you both, and maybe you could help him while I finish cleaning up for the day? It would mean so much to me."

The look that Mr. Ximenez had misinterpreted was partially the residual knight Templar business, and partially my own curiosity. I had always wanted to see the boiler in the basement, and it was just possible that that was where Mr. Ximenez planned for us to study. Also, I was further intrigued by the mention of sweets. It wasn't that I was all that keen on sweets, but I was fascinated with the idea that there might be sweets from Spain I could try. I was wrong of course; all the Ximenezes had in their home was pastry, most of it mildly French-influenced but hardly continental.

Then I had the other brilliant idea. If I became good friends with Raul, perhaps Mr. Ximenez would invite me to come over for dinner, and then I would get to see the elusive Mrs. Ximenez about whom I had heard so much and at the same time so little. This would certainly be the greatest bit of information I could ever collect, better than anything Lester could produce. I might even be able to get him to give me a book for free just to hear it. My mind spun with the idea of getting another book so soon on the heels of the last, which I'd already almost finished.

It was settled. I couldn't wait another month for a new book. "What does he need help on?" I asked nonchalantly. No, no trace of opportunism touched my lips, no satisfied smile pulled at my cheeks. I was cool. I was like ice.

"Oh, pretty much everything," Mr. Ximenez laughed. "His grades you know, so bad, it's a wonder he learns anything at all."

I nodded, as if considering. I was ice. I was dry ice, that kind of ice I'd once heard about, the kind that can burn you it's so cold. I was completely at peace with the world, and I was completely philanthropic. Not a hint of self-indulgence, just complete self-sacrifice. "Okay, I'll have to ask my parents," I said, in what I thought must be the most selfless manner possible.

In reality of course, Mr. Ximenez was so desperate to get someone to tutor his son that all

of my emotions could have been bursting to the surface and he wouldn't have noticed or cared. I could have been dancing the mazurka while shouting, "Woohoo, I'm rich!" at the top of my lungs and he would have been just as pleased.

"Oh, of course, you are young, sometimes I forget from how old you look," he said smiling. He didn't fool me one bit. Flattery would get him nowhere. But I was already going there anyway, so I let him think it did. The complex ballet of human interaction was a heady pleasure, one of which I did not often partake. "Please ask your parents, tell them it would only be for a little while." Mr. Ximenez suddenly laughed. "Maybe, who knows, they would be happy to have that time to themselves."

Avarice is certainly not the least of my sins, but as far as pride was concerned, I could take it or leave it. His comment might have stirred up the blood in anyone else, but I knew, probably as well as he did, that my father wouldn't be home and my mother would have her hands full with Davy, not to mention my grandmother.

My grandmother had taken to having a long nap after breakfast, until almost ten, at which point she roused herself, pulled out her Bible, relevant passages book-marked, and stalked out of the house. Whenever anyone asked her where she was going, she would always reply, "Missionary work," in a grim and saintly tone which discouraged further questions.

We later heard from the town rumor mill that she would proceed to the corner of Augustine McClintock Road and Poplar Street, where she would stand, head held high, shoulders squared, for as much as five minutes. Seeing as how no one ever walked down either of those streets, she didn't have much patronage for her mission. Still, after looking up and down the street several times, she would launch into a rousing chorus of *Nearer My God To Thee*, then march back the way she had come. My mother let her go. My father tried not to think about it. I wished I could have seen her do it, but I was always in school, and for some reason she never seemed to do it on Saturdays. Sundays, of course, she was at her services, so it was understandable she skipped the mission then.

I didn't tell Mr. Ximenez any of this. It might have upset him. I also didn't mention that the reason Raul's grades were so low was that he was kicked out of class more often than not for swearing. I expected Mr. Ximenez wouldn't see anything wrong with that. I was wrong of course, although I guess I shouldn't say of course, because I was seldom wrong, even about the things I was wrong about.

"I'll see you tomorrow then maybe," he said, turning away. I watched him walk back down the hall, slop bucket in hand, mop over his shoulder. In a certain light, he looked almost knightly, albeit with a very strange and hairy sword.

Lynne was wearing black today. Her hamster, Mr. Frisky, had died the night before. I longed to rush over, comfort her, dry her tears, and then maybe she would love me. But she wasn't crying and was surrounded by a large group of older girls, all of whom seemed to be talking at once about how tragic it was.

"What's with them?" asked Mullins as he sat on the swing next to me. It made me envy Mullins for a moment; he was so dumb, yet so happy. Clueless and fat, but blissfully happy much of the time, even when we were telling him how dumb and fat he was. Mullins had discovered the secret to happiness; if you don't know about it, it might be good.

At least, that was the secret for his happiness. It's strange; everyone's secret of happiness is different. I knew if I were as fat and stupid as Mullins, I would be monstrously unhappy. I liked knowing about things; in fact, not knowing about things made me angry or frustrated. But

still, it was easy to wish to be Mullins, because at least he wasn't in love with a bimbo in mourning.

"Corn again?" my father asked sadly.

"We've got a bushel, and we've got to eat it before it goes strange," said my mother matter-of-factly. My mother had an odd way of putting things sometimes. It wasn't wrong, just odd. Food never went bad in our house, it went strange. Funnily, that's exactly what food does go; there are really very few things stranger than food that's gone bad. Or strange, I should say.

She also said that things were going rather than ready. She would say, "Supper's going! Better get to the table." Of course, it was all in those low tones she always spoke, but still, it was rather odd.

"How much is left?" my father asked dejectedly as he took another ear of corn from the pot and began buttering it absently as he talked. My father liked corn, but he was a big believer in variety. He liked to have new things every day; a new pair of pants, a new juice at breakfast, a new sandwich at lunch, a new station on the radio, and a new entree at dinner. My mother, on the other hand, would have been perfectly happy to do things the same way forever. She always put the same pair of pants out for my father every day, she always squeezed him orange juice for breakfast, she always gave him tuna salad for lunch, and while she couldn't do anything about his radio station, she always made the same thing for several nights running at dinner.

My father would find another pair of pants to wear from the bureau, drink the juice quickly and then have black coffee, trade his sandwiches like a schoolchild at lunch, and then listen to his radio, trying to ignore the inevitability of sameness at the dinner table. My mother would make ten pounds of something, and then we'd all have to eat it before it went strange. Ten pounds of meatloaf is not an unimpressive feat, and since I rarely ate much dinner and Davy didn't eat our food, we both silently appreciated my mother while my father scowled.

"Oh, I'd say another ten or twelve ears," said my mother brightly.

My father groaned. Ten or twelve ears meant we would be eating corn tomorrow, possibly the day after that. He began doggedly munching corn from his cob.

I actually liked corn on the cob, so this wasn't a problem for me. As for my sister, she got to eat corn cut from the cob and mashed up, and while that hardly looked like appetizing fare to me, she seemed to enjoy it. At least, I never found any of it on my plate. But then I suppose it had to be better than strained anything, which must have made it a paradisiacal feast.

My grandmother sulked. Her lack of teeth wouldn't allow her to eat corn on the cob, and she held that corn off the cob was an abomination against God for some reason, so she had to eat left-over stew. My mother rarely ever had any left-overs which were left over for any significant period, but the one exception was her stew. She would make gallons of it at the end of summer, using all the rest of the fresh vegetables in anticipation of the winter scarcity, and then she would can most of it so, as she put it, "the family can have vitamins year round." I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'd read somewhere that canning takes most of the vitamins out of things. I couldn't remember why, or where I'd read it, so it would have been difficult to convince my mother anyway. So the stew was always available.

My grandmother didn't have strong feelings about the stew one way or the other, but she desperately wanted to eat corn on the cob, and since she couldn't, she sulked. It was one of the most pleasant things about corn for my father; he knew that it was likely he could go through a whole meal without provoking my grandmother's divine wrath over something. Amazingly, this was usually the case, which I wouldn't have laid odds on, given my grandmother's temperament.

We sat in silence for a while, and the sound of crunching corn was all that could be heard. The last rays of the sun filtered through the window and shone like a beacon on my grandmother, who was still glowering over her stew. No one else noticed, but I thought it was very odd, her being wreathed in light like that. I resolved to continue my putsch to go to one of my grandmother's services, because I was sure that God had something to do with it and I wanted to find out what.

"Pass the salt," said my father as he laid into another ear. Davy ate the last bite of her corn mush and chuckled at something mysterious. I laughed too. My parents glared at me.

My mother sent me with half a dozen eggs for the Ximenez family. Raul was there, as always, sitting on his porch and holding a pencil. The thrill of seeing the outside of the Ximenez house had worn off after the first few times; now I was just sorry to have to go there on such a beautiful day.

I never saw Mrs. Ximenez, although Raul, when asked, told me that she was inside. "She's not comfortable with strangers," he said, as if this explained everything.

"Why not?" I asked impolitely, and I knew it, but I still wanted to know and Raul never seemed to mind impropriety elsewhere.

"She just isn't," he said shortly, with a look on his face that indicated he would rather talk about the threes. I sighed.

Raul's front porch was a curious thing. It didn't seem to be connected to the house at all, as if it had been made somewhere else entirely and moved to the house many years later. It didn't seem to match the color of the house, which was a fading green. It was green too, but a very different, almost lime green, and it wasn't faded at all. The roof was low and held up by four posts which were rough to the touch, as though whoever had made them had been called away before they were finished.

The roof itself was shingled, but not the way any other roofs in town were shingled. It was covered in overlapping plates of a light gray wood which also appeared unfinished somehow. I often lost myself in thoughts about the porch and Raul had to poke me with his pencil to get me to answer a question. He often used the point rather than the eraser, which seemed, and rightly so, to be a little much.

"Look, what is so difficult about this?" I asked. "All you have to do is keep adding the same number. You know how to add, right?"

Raul did know how to add. As a matter of fact, he knew how to multiply too, but he just wouldn't take the time to commit the various tables to memory. He could remember seventeen ways to question the fidelity of one's mother, twice as many comments on her eating habits, and all without breaking a sweat, but he could not be troubled to learn multiplication by rote. Secretly, I agreed with him and would have been quite happy to commit all those derogatory comments and more to memory had he been willing to share them, but he didn't and so I had to keep trying to get him to learn his threes.

I was so wrapped up in this that I didn't see the eggs disappear, which they most certainly did, for the next time I looked over in their direction, they were no longer in evidence. At the time, I was rather impressed with this feat of legerde-egg, but Mrs. Ximenez seemed to be rather good at that sort of thing, because often drinks and snacks would appear for us when I wasn't looking. As it happened, Mrs. Ximenez was rather light on her feet and had perfected the art of not being seen or heard while she had been in training to be a maid. It was still rather impressive, but completely within the realm of possibility.

Raul began again to write out the threes, and I again turned my thoughts to the roof and wondered if it was the sort that a pirate might have built over his rum distillery in the Caribbean. It wasn't, but that didn't stop me from thinking about it.

"You're out!" shouted Bing the referee. Bing was named Irving, but it is the curse of the young that they cannot properly pronounce names, and so by the time we all could pronounce "Irving" without a "b," Bing had been forever labeled Bing. He was a singularly official child, the kind whom one would assume would run for class president or chairman of the snack committee. We had both of those in Vincent Rector Elementary, and the snacks were definitely the preferable position. But Bing turned his official nature to a solitary activity: he was the referee. For whatever game happened to be being played, wherever it might be on the playground, Bing would be the referee.

Sometimes Bing would be out sick or on vacation and there would be no referee on the playground. Games invariably descended quickly into chaos in those circumstances, with vast school-wide donnybrooks that would have to be broken up by Mr. Piper the phys-ed teacher, an imposing man who could probably have stopped Communism in its tracks in Eastern Europe, given a chance. Because of this chaos, Bing was an extremely valuable commodity, and so even though he was only in my grade, kids from the upper grades would offer him all sorts of favors and possessions to get him to preside over their games.

Bing could not be bought, however. He chose one game each day to be the sanctioned event and anyone who wanted to play with Bing the referee had to play that game. He knew all the rules for every sport backward and woe betide the kid who tried to argue. In those instances, everyone else would immediately kick the kid out of the game and he or she would be blackballed on the playground until everyone forgot. Such was the power that Bing wielded.

"Rats!" shouted Tip as he threw his hat to the dirt. "I knew I shouldn't have tried for second." Tip was the playground deity of sports, and when he said he shouldn't have tried for second, we all believed him.

I sat on the sidelines taking all this in with half an ear while with the rest of my brain I was rereading *The Necromancer's Curse*, a particularly good book which I'd read many times before but which never seemed to get old. The Necromancer was an evil fellow but he somehow made you root for him, and I was rooting away for all I was worth.

The next few minutes of the game were lost to me because the Necromancer was about to conduct a particularly fiendish ceremony which would forever bind the soul of Leah, the young ingénue, to a crystal which the Necromancer was going to use to draw her to his castle and make her his bride. He was about half-way through, just getting into the really juicy bits with blood and eye of newt, when I heard something, or rather didn't hear something.

They say you never hear the one that gets you. In this case, they were quite right, although I'm not sure they had in mind that you would be reading a particularly lurid book at the time, nor do I think that "the one" they were talking about was a line drive foul ball to the third base side. But perhaps they did mean all of these things, in which case I wouldn't have heard the ball regardless. This would have been somewhat comforting to me except I did hear the explosion of sound and the crunch of ball hitting head, and it was rather painful too, which kind of nullified the joy of knowing that they were right and that I didn't hear it coming. I didn't think any of these things at the time; I merely let out a loud "WHA!" and then toppled sideways, the Necromancer cackling in my ear until I realized that he wasn't, and at that point I was unconscious and couldn't do anything about it.

When Tip had crutches, everyone thought he was a hero. When Pete broke his arm, everyone wanted to sign the cast. When Lester nearly drowned in the creek, he was grounded for a month but he got his name in the paper.

When I got a mild concussion from a baseball to the head, my grandmother scared the doctor away. Mild-mannered Doctor Fanning stopped by to check on me in the afternoon, after all the ruckus. My parents came to get me at school, which was ruckus enough. Then Mr. Piper hunted down Hank Chulpin, who'd had the misfortune of being at bat at the time, and frogmarched him into the Principal's office so he could apologize to me and my parents. I don't know how they felt, but it didn't really matter to me, as I was completely unable to see or hear him due to the spots and ringing. I'm not even sure why my parents didn't just skip the whole thing and take me home straight from the field, but I guess there are procedures to be followed.

I missed all of this because of the aforementioned spots and ringing, but I was told later on by Lester, who said it was the most fun he'd had in years. I thanked him for his sympathy. But before all that, and after the ruckus, when Doctor Fanning came by to make sure I was alright, I was aware, although only through a haze of pain.

Doctor Fanning was our family doctor and he lived just down the street, so we were always first on his list of people to check up on. Even if none of us were sick, sometimes Doctor Fanning would still drop in to make sure of that and enjoy a cup of tea with my mother. He sometimes seemed a little worried about Davy, but he tried to hide it. Now he was bending over my bed, asking me questions I couldn't answer, shining lights in my eyes.

"He's a tool of Satan!" came my grandmother's voice from the haze. I could hear my mother trying to calm her, but my grandmother was not one to be calmed when there was Satan lurking about. She came storming into my room several seconds later.

"Oh, hello Mrs..." was all Doctor Fanning could get out. He really should have known better. He and my grandmother had what could be called politely an interesting relationship. He tried to treat her, and she tried to exorcise him. Sometimes, when she was very ill, he would be able to get away with treating her without the exorcism, but usually the minute she was strong enough to stop treatment, she would, and there was no way of convincing her that the pills had to be taken or the bed had to be rested in.

My grandmother believed strongly that Brother Leon could cure her of any disease, so whenever she felt ill she would withdraw twenty dollars from her savings account and send it to Brother Leon with a note describing her affliction. Sometimes she would do this if she thought she might come down with something in the near future as well, and sometimes she would forget to mail the twenty dollars and we would find the envelope weeks later under a pile of darned socks. My father always wanted to take the money but my mother and morality usually prevailed. The first time this happened she returned the envelope to my grandmother, only to be accused of pilfering the mail. So from then on, my mother simply sent the envelope to Brother Leon. My father bemoaned the loss of so many twenty dollar bills, but he bemoaned it quietly in case my grandmother should hear.

However, sometimes even twenty dollars and Brother Leon weren't enough. When my grandmother became really ill, she went to church. She claimed that it did wonders for her constitution. Usually after a day or so, she would either get over whatever it was that she thought was serious enough to warrant spiritual healing, or we would have to go collect her from church because she was too ill to walk home. Once she hitched a ride with a nice couple who took her to the next town over because she forgot which town she lived in. We had to go collect

her there too. It was usually then that Doctor Fanning would be able to practice his arts.

I believe that Doctor Fanning bore my grandmother no ill will, no matter how many times she cursed him or attempted to sprinkle him with holy water, not to mention the constant streams of Bible verses he had to endure whenever she was around. I'm also not completely sure my grandmother bore Doctor Fanning any ill will personally. It was just that she was a missionary of her church and he was Satan. They were star-crossed.

This time though, my grandmother had a torch. It wasn't much of a torch; it was more of a candle than a torch, but she held it with conviction and with a righteous flame in her eye that more than made up for her torch's shortcomings. "Don't you touch that child!" she cried in a voice that seemed to well up from deep within her.

"I was just making sure the boy's okay," said Doctor Fanning reasonably. This was a mistake, but honestly made.

"I can see your true form!" spake my grandmother. "I know you for who you really are! Show yourself Beelzebub! You will not take the child!"

"Well... I guess I'd better be going..." trailed off Doctor Fanning as my grandmother strode nearer and nearer.

"And Lo, there came upon them a great Beacon, shining down upon them, and a Voice cried out, 'The Light shows evil for what it is!'" quoted my grandmother, although not from the Bible, I was later able to ascertain. It seems she had been making up much of the things she said were from the Bible because she felt they sounded better. I only discovered her trick when I read the whole Bible, and so few people do that that my grandmother was very convincing.

Doctor Fanning was certainly convinced. He backed away as my grandmother came nearer and nearer. Finally he seemed ready to flee, but he was cornered. My grandmother had a look of triumph on her face as she thrust the torch into Doctor Fanning's hair.

Much of the rest of this episode was lost to me because it was loud and rather confused. Doctor Fanning's hair began to burn with a smell that sickened my stomach. I heard several voices cry out, one of them certainly my grandmother, one of them probably Doctor Fanning, as my father wasn't home. Then there was a mad rush of figures and flames and a scuffle. When the situation resolved, my mother was standing with an empty bucket and my grandmother was soaking wet. The torch was out. Doctor Fanning was nowhere to be seen.

"Jeff, why don't the teachers eat with us?"

"You're asking me like I know Mullins. Why should I know?"

"Well, you're smart."

"I'm not omniscient."

"What's onmissioned?"

"Never mind."

Actually, I did know why the teachers didn't eat with us. I wouldn't have eaten with us either, had I had the choice. We were a bunch of very messy children. I wasn't very messy, but I didn't eat much at lunch time so it was hard to say. But Mullins was the messiest of all. He positively inhaled his food and this left particles of it on his face, his clothing, and anyone unfortunate enough to sit within spitting distance. His messy nest of blonde hair would sometimes be speckled with crumbs, such was the force with which he ate.

I was the unfortunate one today. I wasn't always. Sometimes I would remember and try to be first in line out of the room so I could pick my seat before Mullins got to the lunch room. The choices were limited, since none of the older kids wanted me to sit with them and that left

only the tables at the back, where all children our age were segregated.

It wasn't that older kids didn't like me. No one really liked me, except maybe Raul, but that was only because we spent so much time together that he couldn't help it. Mullins liked me of course, but Mullins liked everyone and no one liked Mullins, so he didn't count. I suppose I should have felt sorry for Mullins, being as he was in much the same position I was, but he made it very difficult, even when I wasn't sitting near him.

We were also a very noisy group. With five or six grades crammed into one room, it was hard not to be. The acoustics of the lunch room were appalling, and so sound was made louder but more indistinct, so I found I had to shout simply to be heard. It was a feedback loop gone out of control, and the only limit was how loud we could all shout. I suppose the teachers could have quieted us down, but they wisely elected to simply let us yell. It beat having us throwing food or punching each other. I suspected that the teachers on lunch room duty wore earplugs.

The biggest culprit as far as shouting was concerned was Jolly. His given name was John or Joshua or James, but we called him Jolly, not because he was Jolly, but because none of us could ever keep straight which "J" name he was. Jolly was at the top, the peak, and so he could yell as loudly as he wanted because there were so many people straining to hear him yell. He was surrounded by a throng every day as he ate, and once or twice I caught glimpses of them getting him more food, waiting on him hand and foot. He was the oldest kid in school, and as such, and also because he had an older brother who would pass things on to him, he was revered as the source of all knowledge, especially knowledge of subjects not taught in school. Since younger kids were never allowed to approach him, I had no idea what knowledge it was he had, but I can be sure he was wrong or lying about most of it. Still, they ate it up and begged for more.

Jolly, by coincidence, was also the biggest culprit as far as punching was concerned, which was another reason people flocked to him. Every week or so, Jolly would pound the living daylights out of some poor sap for whatever reason, and as a result he would be sent home early and given various punishments. The Principal failed to understand that these measures merely increased Jolly's status. Younger kids lived in fear of being caught doing something wrong by Jolly and having to be the poor sap for that week.

As an outsider and a much younger kid, I was fairly safe, not that I didn't worry about it. Jolly would have to be very mad at me to even take the time to pummel me, and I tried very hard to stay out of his way entirely. This was fairly easy to do, since Jolly didn't play sports at school, he never went to the library, and he was always surrounded by a mob at lunch. I kept my bandage on my head for a few days more than necessary though, just to be on the safe side; I was sure Jolly wouldn't hit a kid with a head injury. In fact, he might have, but I was better off not knowing that.

The biggest culprit as far as food throwing was concerned, however, was not Jolly. It was Stacy. Stacy had been an expert at covert food throwing since she was in kindergarten and now that she was old enough to be thought of as a young woman rather than a little girl, she used these skills to good effect. I was never exactly sure what it was that made a girl turn into a young woman, but at some point it happened. Lynne was most definitely a young woman. Most of her friends were too, the ones that weren't simply hanging around her hoping her popularity would rub off on them. Some of my classmates had turned into young women even, although unlike Lynne I couldn't see any difference. I guess it depended on how one acted.

Stacy, however, was a young woman in name only. She was the sneakiest, most devious child to ever have graced the halls of Vincent Rector, and somehow she never got caught. She

wore frilly dresses with bows in her hair and smiled ever so sweetly at teachers. She always did her work and always got good grades.

But when she wasn't being watched, she was pure evil. Unlike Jolly, who at least had the good taste not to be completely capricious, Stacy would attack anyone anywhere at any time. You never knew when you might be targeted by Stacy, and there was no way to prevent it from happening; it happened to everyone at one time or another, even Jolly. And even if you knew, as I did, that Stacy was responsible, you couldn't do anything about it. No one would have ever believed you.

I shot a glance in Stacy's direction. Secretly, although I was in love with Lynne, I was infatuated with Stacy. She was the yin to my yang, the evil to my good, the night to my day; in fact, she was pretty much exactly the opposite of me, or so I thought. Actually, she was rather similar to me; we both were more intelligent than we let on, we both were outsiders, although I was an outsider on the outside while she was an outsider inside, behind all the pretense and pink bows, and lastly, we both loved pulp paperbacks. But since I didn't let on how intelligent I was and neither did she, and we both stayed away from each other, being outsiders, we could never talk about our shared love of pulp action adventure, and thus I remained convinced that she was my mirror image.

This fact simply made me more infatuated with her. Even when she threw rotten eggs at me on Halloween, or when she let a skunk loose in the halls and it sprayed me, among others, I still couldn't think ill of her. Well, I could think ill of her, but that was exactly why I was infatuated with her.

Stacy was sitting, rather prim and proper, on the outskirts of the Jolly mob, quietly eating an ice cream sandwich. Her eyes were focused on Lynne, and I could read in her glance dark portents. I was torn. Should I do nothing and let my love fall victim to whatever fiendish design Stacy had planned, or should I warn Lynne, when there was every likelihood that she wouldn't believe me anyway and that I would become Stacy's next target. Plus there was the infatuation. It was a struggle of epic proportions.

"Hey Jeff, you going to eat that?" Mullins was eyeing my unfinished sandwich lustfully. I would say he was being greedy, but to Mullins, food was not something he needed, it was something he lusted after. I shook myself out of my dilemma.

"Sure, go ahead," I said absently. My sandwich disappeared in a feat of speed only matched in my mind by Mrs. Ximenez and her disappearing eggs. I heard a scream from behind me. It was better not to look; anyway, I knew what I would see.

"It seems to me that voting for the liberal is a waste of time," said my father. "I always do, but they never win. We've had a conservative Town Council for as long as I can remember."

"The important thing is to participate in the process," said my mother. "But I do agree that the liberals never seem to win."

"Heathens the lot of them," said my grandmother. Of late she had become much less vociferous, but she still made her opinions known. No one seemed to pay attention to her that time, so I decided to humor her.

"What, liberals?" I asked her. My parents were talking about something else at the other end of the table and my sister was eating her strained carrots, which was a definite surprise. They were far from the worst baby food; I'd been quite partial to them myself way back when. Still, Davy was not very interested in baby food, so the fact that she was eating it, whatever kind it happened to be, was something of a shock.

"No, politicians," said my grandmother kindly. "I don't expect you to understand just yet, but politicians are evil, every last one of them. Just you remember that, and don't trust a single one of them."

"Mom, stop filling his head with that stuff," said my mother. She always called my grandmother "Mom" even though my grandmother wasn't her mother. I think it made my grandmother feel more kindly toward my mother, since my grandmother's actual offspring, my father, never called her "Mom." He called her "Granny," which wasn't unpleasant, but it lacked the direct familial ties which one would expect a son to feel for his mother. It must be said though that my grandmother never backhanded my mother or shouted at her directly. Even when my mother would do things which my grandmother obviously found completely wrong, my grandmother never raised a hand.

"Why?" asked my grandmother reasonably. "It's true. Politicians lie for a living. I don't need anyone to tell me that, and the boy shouldn't either." My family all called me "the boy" even though they called my sister "Davy" instead of "the baby." It furthered my belief that Jeffrey was not my real name, but I suspected my family didn't know what my real name was any more than anyone else did.

"Still, you'll make him grow up and be apathetic about politics," my mother replied. "You may feel that politicians are rotten, but politics are important."

"That's as may be," said my grandmother. Then, in a hushed voice, she whispered, "But it isn't. Politics is just as crooked as politicians." I heard her, which was what she intended, and if my mother heard it, she didn't say anything. She did give me a look, so I was a little worried about politics for a while.

My grandmother had every reason to feel that politicians were liars. Every year she went to the Town Council and demanded that they vote to change the name of Main Street to Jesus Street. The Council always said they would look into it, just to get rid of her. Of course, they had no intention of looking into it, as there was no chance of the name being changed. Still, when nothing was done about it for a year, my grandmother grew more and more convinced that they were lying to her, and that they hadn't looked into it.

Once they gave her a huge stack of forms to fill out, making a motion before such and such Committee of such and such Title to such and something else. The Council had failed to reckon with my grandmother's intense zeal for her cause, as well as the fact that she had very little else to do. She dutifully filled out the forms one by one, in triplicate, with signatures and all of the other bureaucratic business that politicians and civil servants thrive on. Then she submitted this mass of paperwork to the Council, who were understandably a bit nonplussed. She returned every week or so for a few months, and every time she showed up someone had to tell her than the forms were still being processed. Processed into mulch, I would imagine, since again, the Council had no intention of considering the proposal.

After she'd been given the run-around for as long as she could stand, she barged into a private Council meeting and demanded to know what was taking so long. We had to go collect her from the police station. The Sergeant was very nice about the whole thing, and he said that he'd just brought her down there to keep the Council happy, but my grandmother would hear none of it. She said she would stay in the police station until her demands were met, and she started a hunger strike and twenty-four hour prayer session in her "cell," which was actually the janitor's closet.

Two days later we had to come and collect her again because the police were afraid she was going to hurt herself. She'd been ranting and raving and kicking up a huge fuss in the

closet, and finally someone remembered that they stored the rat poison in there. When we removed her from the closet she was a bedraggled spectacle, but she claimed forthrightly to be the victor and marched home trailing us behind her. After that, she swore off all involvement with politics and politicians and declared that she would change the name of Main Street herself. So everyone in the family had to refer to Main Street as Jesus Street whenever she was around, which mollified her slightly, although occasionally she would go out without saying for what and come back with a satisfied smile on her face.

"Dad, why do the liberals lose?" I asked my father, interested. My grandmother grumbled but stayed silent.

"I'm not really sure," my father admitted. "Probably because the town's pretty conservative. People around here usually are. Nothing wrong with that in small doses, but occasionally it means that things don't change quickly enough."

My father was a Union man, born and raised. He was firmly convinced that workers would be slaves if it weren't for the Union. He was the President of Local 129 of the Miners, Lumberjacks, and Engineers Union, and he was committed to the cause. Thus, he voted for liberals whenever possible because he said they supported Unions.

My mother was divided on the subject. On the one hand, she supported my father. On the other hand, she didn't like the Union because she felt it made my father work too hard. She based this feeling on the fact that, as President, my father had to do Union things in addition to his normal work. It was a somewhat flawed line of reasoning but not entirely illogical.

My grandmother didn't care about Unions. Until she'd given up on politicians, she had been staunchly in favor of anyone who had faith; in other words, she wanted Brother Leon and her pastor to rule the town. Since Brother Leon actually lived rather far away and her pastor never ran for office, she was usually disappointed, but she was at least happy when someone won who wasn't foreign, which my grandmother equated with Communism. She had no other problems with foreigners, but she felt that if they were put in charge of the government, we'd all be Communists before the week was out.

I was far too young to vote, but I was interested in politics nonetheless. Specifically, I was interested in politics as pertained to world affairs in the various spy novels I read. As far as politics in the real world, I didn't want to be class president and knew I would never be chairman of the snack committee, so beyond that I didn't care one way or the other.

My sister Davy seemed to favor third party candidates, since she seemed most interested when they came on television. It could have been that she simply found the idea that they weren't liberal or conservative fascinating, or perhaps she was a Communist and we just didn't know it yet. I didn't mind, although I imagined that if she were, my grandmother might have a bit of a problem.

"People are always more conservative when it comes to government," said my mother. "Even if they're very liberal, they'll be slightly more conservative when they vote." It was by far the most intelligent thing I'd ever heard my mother say, which wasn't saying much since she didn't say very many intelligent things to me, supposing I wouldn't understand them. Still, it gave me pause, and I considered for a moment the possibility that perhaps my mother was smarter than I gave her credit for. "Oh look, Davy's eaten all her carrots!" she exclaimed. "And just in time for pudding too. Good girl Davy, weren't they yummy?"

It was Thursday, so we had tapioca. Or rather, my mother and Davy had tapioca. My father didn't eat his, and my mother knew better than to serve my grandmother any. I ate a spoonful or two, then sculpted the rest of it into a rough island, which I happily inhabited with

wizards and castaways until my mother took the bowl away.

"And so Lynne's mother called the principal and said that if it ever happened again, she was calling the police!" Lester seemed positively titillated by this last. He was sitting on the hood of his father's car and pontificating to the crowd consisting of me and Lester's dog. The dog seemed the more enthusiastic of the two of us; truth be told, I didn't want to hear about what Stacy had done to Lynne because it recalled the moral dilemma to my mind that I constantly faced, splitting my affections as I did.

"I bet she was just bluffing," I said, to show interest if nothing else. "There's nothing the police could do; they don't know who did it." I knew who did it, and so would anyone else with half a brain in their head, but most people don't have even that much brain, so Stacy was safe.

"Yeah, but Lynne's mother said she'd get the police to do an investigation." Lester was really hamming it up now. I wondered how he could possibly have heard this; I assumed he was simply exaggerating.

"The police have better things to do."

"In this town?" Lester had a good point there; nothing exciting ever seemed to happen to my town. I didn't know about all the various things the police had to do to keep it that way, assuming naively that if there was no smoke, there was no nutcase with a box of matches looking for an unguarded building. I had read far too many detective novels anyway.

"So they do an investigation. What are they going to do, lock someone up for making Lynne cry?" This last made my spirit boil within me. I longed to be the one to reveal the culprit, or even to foil the attempt the next time. Lynne would see me and run to my arms for protection. But then the police would lock Stacy away for life, and I couldn't have that on my conscience either. I was a little hazy on the various sentences one might get, but it seemed to me that life would be too good for anyone who made Lynne cry. Then I listened to my own question and realized I was right, as I often was.

"Do I look like a cop to you?" asked Lester. "So, you got enough for another book yet?"

"I told you, my parents said they can't pay me the quarter allowance I used to get. Something about my father's job." Actually, I knew exactly what that something was. My father, far from being destroyed by the menace of electric rails, had been put on part-time until the mine could fix the problems the Union said they needed to. At the time, this seemed to have very little effect on the family except to reduce my allowance, which was catastrophic for my reading habits. I'd already reread every book in the *Saga of the Dark Knights*, and I just knew that in the next book Roderick was going to be killed by Elwyn, the silent and beautiful assassin.

"So Jer, your family going to have to sell the house?" Lester asked, trying to seem concerned but radiating waves of pure greed. This bit of information would be worth a lot to him; a kid moving was big news.

I didn't give him the benefit of a response. Instead, I gazed up at the sky and ignored Lester. It was a tough thing to do, but definitely worth it.

"Your mother, she does not have to keep sending us such nice things," said Mr. Ximenez as he walked Raul and me home from school. He insisted on meeting my parents to thank them for their generosity, and to see, as he put it, where I got my brain from.

"She always has some extra, so she said she would share it with friends," I said. Inwardly I was saying to myself, "And anything she shares with you is less of the same thing that we have to eat." Also, I was trying hard to figure out how to explain my grandmother to Mr.

Ximenez and Raul. There was always a chance that she would be out on one of her Missions, but it was highly likely that she would either be watching Brother Leon or doing something else completely abnormal. I couldn't remember whether Brother Leon was on at this time, so I had to be prepared for all eventualities.

I had almost considered pursuing the line that Mr. Ximenez had taken up soon after he offered to walk me home. He'd said he felt rude dropping in unexpected, and a small part of me wanted to agree with him and promise to have everyone expect him tomorrow. At least it might have bought a little time. But I liked Mr. Ximenez, and it seemed like that might hurt him, although he'd never admit it, so I told him not to worry and forged on.

"She is so kind, not knowing us and still we are her friends," Mr. Ximenez beamed. "I will ask her maybe where she gets the eggs. Marie said just last night that she had never seen better."

"They made good frittata," chimed in Raul. I had no idea what either of them were talking about, since I didn't know Mrs. Ximenez's first name was Marie and I didn't know what a frittata was, but I smiled and nodded and planned.

When we arrived at my house I led the way up the front steps, which creaked beneath our weight, making me flinch a little. At the door, Mr. Ximenez knocked, a quiet knock which somehow could be heard quite well yet didn't seem intrusive. I guessed he must have learned the trick in Spain.

My mother came to the door with a puzzled look on her face, but when she saw the three of us she smiled wide and opened the door in a hurry. "Hello," she said in that low tone, "I'm Jeffrey's mother." She said her name too, but I tuned that out, since she was my mother and I knew what her name was. "You must be Mr. Ximenez! I'm so glad to finally meet you!"

"No no, the pleasure is mine completely," Mr. Ximenez said with warm politeness. "I am so grateful to you for letting your son help my Raul."

"Oh, so this is little Raul," said my mother, stooping a little and looking at Raul. "Such a handsome fellow, just like his father."

Mr. Ximenez seemed to be a little embarrassed at the compliment, and he elbowed Raul and whispered something in a language I guessed must be Spanish. I was wrong; Mr. Ximenez was speaking French, but either way, neither my mother nor I could make out a word.

"Thank you Jeffrey's mother," said Raul shyly.

"Why you're welcome Raul, I'm glad he could help." My mother talked that way with children; not the way many adults talk to children, but not the way she talked to other adults either. I did sometimes notice that she would talk to some adults the way she talked to children, and she seemed to talk to Davy completely differently from everyone else, but I guessed that was because Davy was a baby.

"I also wanted to give my thanks and the thanks of my wife for all the gifts you have given us," said Mr. Ximenez forthrightly. "We are so pleased to call you friends."

"Well, any friend of Jeffrey is a friend of his family," said my mother. "And really Mr. Ximenez..."

"Oh please, you must call me Domingo, it is no good to have formalities between friends," Mr. Ximenez interrupted. So his name was Domingo. It sounded very knightly indeed, and I zoned out the rest of the conversation, which was beginning to bore me anyway, and tried to dress Mr. Ximenez out in a suit of armor. I wasn't sure what Spanish armor would look like, but I imagined a great deal of decoration which was completely extraneous to the fighting capabilities of the suit but was necessary all the same. His close-cropped dark hair became a

long flowing mane, his small mustache grew to almost ridiculous proportions, and his name, which I spelled wrong, was blazoned on his shield. I also didn't know what the Spanish word for "Sir" was, so I just called him Sir Domingo Ximenez and left it at that.

Then I noticed my model was turning to leave, and Mr. Ximenez became his ordinary self, slightly stooped with work and moving with small steps which weren't timid but just practical. He waved goodbye to my mother and me as we stood on the porch, and then he turned for home, Raul trailing behind him slightly like a squire in the presence of a lord.

"The boy never goes to church," said my grandmother reasonably, or at least I thought so. It was Sunday morning and she was trying yet again to convince my mother that I should come with her to service.

"The boy never goes to church because we never go to church," said my mother. This was perhaps not the best thing to say in the situation. My mother looked a little flustered; Sunday mornings she liked to wake up gradually and have coffee and read the paper, not stand in her nightgown trying to argue theology with my grandmother.

"Well, maybe you all should come too," said my grandmother. "You aren't so busy that the Lord can't have an hour of your Sunday."

"Mom, we'd love to come, you know that, but we just... well, we aren't really comfortable there." My mother was just digging herself deeper. My father would definitely not go to my grandmother's church, and my mother, for all her trying to make it seem less blasphemous, was firmly in that boat as well. Davy was noncommittal on the whole thing; she was still asleep in her crib upstairs.

"Why not?" asked my grandmother sharply. "It's the Lord's house! Why should anyone feel uncomfortable unless they've sinned." Then she softened. "I know it's hard sometimes, but if you just ask the Lord for forgiveness, you won't feel uncomfortable any more."

"Mom, maybe next week; it's too short notice," said my mother. She was starting to wake up a bit and realized that was the best solution.

My mother had been putting my grandmother off for nearly as long as I'd been alive to witness it. I didn't remember the first year or so, and the second year my grandmother hadn't been so insistent because she was still living in Bakersville with my grandfather. But my mother had certainly been putting my grandmother off ever since she came to live with us, and for all I knew, she had been putting my grandmother off before that, just not as frequently. My grandmother felt it was shameful. My mother felt it was the only sane thing to do. My father thought my grandmother should stay home too, which was why he didn't try to put her off any more; she wouldn't pay any attention to him on the subject of religion or church.

"Well, I suppose that's true; I wouldn't want you to have to rush," said my grandmother with a hint of sarcasm but not altogether unkindly. "But the boy and I are ready, so we'll go."

My mother was caught. She couldn't stop me, and she didn't want to go herself, so she finally saw the futility in struggling and gave in. So I followed my grandmother out the door to go to the place I'd been wanting to see ever since I knew it existed. I was going to take in a service.

I guess I should have expected to be disbelieved when I went in the next day. Most people don't have grandmothers who take them to church, let alone a church of the kind to which my grandmother had taken me. I would be willing to wager that few people have that sort of grandmother.

Lester's grandmothers, since he still had two, were both nice little old Jewish ladies who lived in New York City and only visited occasionally, although never on Christmas, a fact I registered and couldn't quite understand. I knew they weren't Christian, but that didn't seem to matter as far as Christmas was concerned. Mr. Do, the grocer, was Chinese, but he still put up a tree in his store.

Mr. Do pronounced his name "dough" rather than "due," a fact which didn't seem to matter much to me until I saw his name written out. The reason I'd never seen Mr. Do's name written out before was that I had, but it had been in Chinese. Wade-Giles transliterations being what they were, "due" became "dough" somewhere deep in the recesses of some office somewhere, and so said all of us. I wasn't sure if Mr. Do had a grandmother, but if he had, she would probably have still been in China.

Lynne had at least one grandmother who had died, since that was the center of her drama for a week or so. Whenever Lynne experienced a larger amount of drama than usual, I suffered more than usual, because I longed to worm my way into her good graces through her drama, but knew I couldn't. Such was life, I reasoned, and I can't say that I was all that far from the truth when I reasoned it.

Tip had no grandmothers. This wasn't a fact he liked to bring up; his only remaining grandfather was something of an embarrassment to him and his family, so he tried not to mention grandparents at all. Tip's grandfather was everything my grandmother wasn't; he too did things which were tremendously trying, but where my grandmother did them out of piety, Tip's grandfather did them out of cussedness, or so he said.

I liked Tip's grandfather, and it was through him, rather than Tip, that I knew that Tip had no grandmothers. Tip's grandfather liked me, and whenever he saw me in the street he would buy me an ice cream cone or some other small treat. In exchange, I would sit with him and listen to him talk about the past. Apparently that was really all Tip's grandfather wanted; since he didn't get it often enough, he would do the various things he attributed to cussedness.

Tip's grandfather liked to disturb the peace, and not in the religious way either. Sometimes, when the weather was warm, he would take all his clothes off and swim naked in the creek until someone called the police on him. Other times he would just position himself outside some random store and start cursing people. He wasn't as imaginative as Raul, but he was certainly louder. This usually resulted in Tip's grandfather sitting in jail for the evening, which he did with gusto. He refused to eat the food they gave him, went to the bathroom everywhere but the bathroom, and threw things at anyone who came near. He told me, in strictest confidence, that he did all these things because he was too old to work and too smart to die. I couldn't argue with him, although I secretly hoped that when I got that old, I'd have something a little better to do with my time.

Still, with all these and more grandparents, none of my schoolyard peerage had a grandmother who took them to services like the one to which my grandmother took me. So I shouldn't have been all that surprised that everyone thought I was making it all up.

"Jer, you're pulling my leg," said Lester when I told him. "I know you want to come up with something to trump me, but you'll have to make up a better story than that."

"Your stories stink," was all Lynne said to me. Then she turned to Tip and said, "Why does he lie like that?"

"Beats me," said Tip. "I thought it was pretty funny though." That was actually the most positive comment I got.

"Yeah," said Mullins. "Is it lunch yet?"

After this rather sorry debut of my story, I stopped telling people. But I knew better. Everything I said was the truth, and if the kids couldn't handle it, then they wouldn't get to hear about it. Then Jolly decided I was in his way, and I had bigger things to worry about.

"Why are we going to the dentist?" I asked my mother, hoping she would relent and decide not to take us after all. Like all reasonable people, I loathed going to the dentist because he was the personification of evil. That, and the fact that I never brushed my teeth. I was a busy person, far too busy to waste time cleaning my teeth. I seldom took a bath, and usually only because my mother said she wouldn't let me in the house if I didn't. So I failed to see why I should take care of my teeth. They never did anything for me.

"We're going because it's that time of year," said my mother shortly.

"Boy, stop pestering your mother," said my father. He said this every time I said anything. My father was a firm believer in absolute silence in three locations: church, the front of the television while whatever was being watched was on, and the car. Since we never went to church, the silence which was reserved for the divine was reapportioned to television and car, and woe betide anyone who violated it.

"Fluoridated water is a tool of the Devil," said my grandmother matter-of-factly, patting my arm in commiseration. My grandmother had no teeth at all and stoutly refused to change that situation. She also refused any special consideration, mulching all her food herself and turning away anything she suspected to have been altered for her benefit in any way. It went without saying that she hated the dentist too, which was definitely a point in her favor in my book.

I knew that fluoridated water was a tool of the Devil because her pastor had said as much in his sermon. I wasn't entirely sure why fluoridated water was evil, but I was willing to believe that someone as arbitrary as God might easily decide something like that without a reason. I drank the water anyway because I was thirsty, and also because I liked the sound of the Devil anyway. He always featured prominently in the more occult books in my library.

My father's rule on quiet didn't extend to my grandmother, since he had no jurisdiction over her, but he still grumbled as he drove. My father gripped the steering wheel rather tightly whenever he drove with the rest of us in the car. I never knew why at the time, but I suspected it was because our weight made the car harder to steer. That wasn't it at all, but it also wasn't because the family was stressful. My father had been in a bad accident once, one about which he told no one, wherein his cousin was killed, and subsequently my father was deeply concerned that the same thing might happen to us, so he remained vigilant at all times when we were in the car.

"Yes Mom, I know," said my mother, at the same time soothing Davy, who was getting rather restless. "But we have to go to the dentist anyway. The boy needs to have good teeth."

"But we just went," I said, risking the woe that might betide me because I was sure that we had just been.

"I know it seems like that, but it's only a little early," said my mother. "I needed to bring Davy in, and it made the most sense to have us all done on the same day." She was practical, but my mother had no conception of the horror she was bringing upon me. The last time, the dentist had hinted that if my teeth didn't straighten up, he might have to take some of them out, which I was sure involved horrible medieval torture devices like the ones I read about in the book I had about the Spanish Inquisition. I'd actually gotten that one above board; my mother liked to encourage me in school, and I convinced her that the way to do it would be to buy me history books, since I knew that history was replete with gore and horror.

Given the chance, I would rather have had lunch with the President. That was the first prize of the essay contest we all had to enter. Mrs. Lee said it would help us build character, whatever that meant. The topic of discussion was freedom, and how it was part of the country or the statue of liberty with a flag maybe and possibly a bald eagle holding a gun shooting at Commies, all wrapped in a copy of the Constitution and dunked in a big old American apple pie. That wasn't really the topic, but it might as well have been, for all I cared.

Freedom to me meant that I could read. That was pretty much it. I'd read that in China they didn't let you read, so I was glad I didn't live in China. Actually I was wrong, and the book I'd been reading at the time was so out of date as to be practically useless, but since I didn't know anyone from China or in China, and I would never think to ask anyone about China, I remained ignorant. I suppose I could have been glad that I hadn't had to participate in the Xia Feng, but since I didn't know what that was either, freedom to me meant reading.

Since I had such a limited view of freedom, I didn't think I would be able to write much of an essay on the topic. I was sure Mrs. Lee wouldn't accept an essay with only one sentence which was about reading, and even if she did, because of a head injury or something, the judges certainly wouldn't. Since I reasoned that more than our school must have been participating in this particular contest, given the fact that the President was involved, it stood to reason that I didn't have a chance at the first prize.

Second prize was something singularly uninteresting, so uninteresting that knowledge of its identity passed from my brain as soon as it entered. It too was a national prize, so I wouldn't be winning that either.

But there was a school prize too: the top student in the school would get a history book. I was pretty sure this history book would be something boring and juvenile, but a book was better than nothing. I had no way of knowing, of course, that the book in question was rather better than I expected, simply because no one expected a child my age to win it.

So I resolved to win that book, although, as I just said, I would rather have had lunch with the President.

Rain made the walk home from school less pleasant, and wind made the rain even less pleasant, and if the temperature was cold enough, the walk home from school began to take on the epic proportions of the Bataan Death March, although much colder and significantly shorter. Also I suppose it involved less shooting and beating and killing, plus there was no Japanese officer waiting in the wings to chop my head off if I didn't walk home.

There was, however, Mrs. Inglis, and she was nearly as bad as a katana-wielding maniac if you got on her bad side. She was three and a half feet tall, most of which was made up of muscle, and even though she couldn't tower over anyone, she made up for it by being completely psychopathic. It was rumored that she'd killed a kid once for talking in the halls during class, and while the rumor was probably not true, it might have been. Even I, who had a healthy mistrust for rumors of this sort, couldn't help but allow that it was entirely possible.

Most times I was fairly cynical about rumors though. I realized far before my schoolyard peers that adults who killed children would most likely be punished in some way, at least by not being allowed to be near kids any more. But Mrs. Inglis was different. I was fully capable of believing that, if she wanted to work somewhere, she would be allowed to work there, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

The most menacing feature of Mrs. Inglis was her teeth. When she talked, it was usually

either barking commands or yelling, but whenever she opened her mouth, for whatever reason, you could see her horrible teeth. They were crooked and yellow from years of misuse, and they were all sharp as knifes. She didn't have a mouth so much as a gaping maw, and everyone in the school lived in fear that one day, she might take a bite out of them. One thing about Mrs. Inglis I knew for sure was that, on my first day of kindergarten, she had scared Cloe Davidson so much that she had to be taken to the nurse's office.

Mrs. Inglis's teeth were actually dentures, because, although she looked ageless, she was 87 years old. Why she came to have dentures that looked like fangs is unknown, but it's hardly surprising, given her temperament. She had outlived five husbands, two of them in the same year, and I cannot imagine the man who would have thought that marrying Mrs. Inglis was a good idea, so one can assume that outliving her husbands was no small feat. She was spiteful, nasty, malicious, and capricious, and thus she was the perfect hall monitor.

She somehow could be anywhere in the halls within two seconds, and she was always there whenever anyone did anything wrong, no matter how hard they tried to avoid her. Since the school only had to pay one person to monitor the halls if they kept Mrs. Inglis, she was tremendously popular with the county school board and was essentially guaranteed employment, and decent wages, until she dropped dead or Satan recalled her to Hell, whichever came first. Knowing Mrs. Inglis, the latter was just as likely as the former.

Needless to say, she didn't take kindly to children lingering around the halls after hours, so, regardless of conditions, home I would trudge. My mother occasionally offered to pick me up with an umbrella, but after she was late once because something had come up, I just turned her down. Better to walk home, possibly falling in the street to be eaten by wild dogs, than to have to wait for my mother until Mrs. Inglis kicked me out.

Thus it was that I walked past Federman's Odd Shop every day, and every day, no matter what the weather, I would stop in front of the window and stare, with longing in my heart, at the bookshelves within. Federman's had every single horror classic ever written, from *Frankenstein* to *Lord of the Wolf Men*, and I dreamed of one day having enough money to go into Federman's and buy the entire shelf of books. I could have been dreaming of owning my own airplane just as easily, as both were about as likely to happen as Mrs. Inglis giving me a cookie. Old Man Federman didn't allow kids in his store; he said they drove away business. Even if I could have entered, Old Man Federman didn't allow anyone, kid or adult, to read the books without buying them. And even if I could have read them, there was no way I could have afforded to buy even one, since they cost upwards of twenty dollars a piece, which was so much money that I wasn't even sure what it would look like. The five hundred ninety-seven dollars and fifteen cents that all of them would have cost was a sum I couldn't even think of without losing count.

So every day I would long, and then, depending on the climate, long some more. I couldn't long too long though, because Old Man Federman didn't allow kids to loiter in front of his store either. Old Man Federman would have been a perfect husband for Mrs. Inglis, but since I'm not sure she ever left the school, nor am I sure he ever left his shop, the chances of them meeting were slim to nil.

"Dad, what does freedom mean to you?" I asked my father as we sat around the dinner table. It was pasta night, so my father was in a talkative mood.

"Means you don't have to work for anyone," he said, slightly muffled, through a mouthful of garlic bread.

"You shouldn't talk with your mouth full," said my grandmother sternly.

"The boy asked a question, I was answering it," said my father petulantly.

"Why are you asking?" asked my mother, who was pulling more garlic bread out of the oven. We had twelve loaves of it, as well as several gallons of spaghetti sauce, but for once my mother had decided to freeze most of the bread. "Winter's coming on," my mother had reasoned wisely, "and there might not be any way to get bread if we need it." Then she had laughed. I got the pun, but what struck me as funny was that my mother would get it.

"I've got to write an essay on freedom, and I wanted to know what other people thought," I said, the truth being the best recourse in this situation.

"Freedom of religion is wasted on most people," said my grandmother. "Matter of fact, freedom of much of anything is wasted on most people. Back in my day, we had to work, and we were happy to do it."

"I think there's something to be said for freedom other than that it means you don't have to work," said my mother. "I think they mean the freedom to do things and say things."

"Oh, so you mean like not being a Communist?" I asked.

"Communists are a heathen lot; don't deserve freedom if you ask me," muttered my grandmother.

"Exactly," said my father at exactly the same time as my mother was saying, "Not quite." They both looked at each other for a moment as if deciding who was going to win.

"Boy, they mean freedom gives you rights," said my grandmother before either of them could speak. "You've got the right to a fair trial, and the right to vote, and things like that. That's what freedom is, they tell you what you have the right to do."

"Doesn't sound so great to me," I said. "Do I have the right to read things that I want to?"

"If you're talking about anyone, then yes, under the Constitution, you have rights to expression, and I'm pretty sure freedom of expression covers reading. But if you're talking about you personally, then no, you do not." My mother was clearly the fascist of the family.

"You don't have the right to vote either," said my father.

"It's not polite to correct your own mother," said my grandmother, shocked.

"I wasn't correcting you, I was just explaining..." My father didn't get to finish, because the slap shut his mouth and scrambled his brains, and when he'd gotten himself back into order, he'd forgotten his train of thought, so he ate another piece of garlic bread.

"Why don't I have the right to expression?" I asked. "I'm a person. I should get freedom too."

"But the law of this house takes precedent over the law of the land," said my mother with a grim smile on her face, "and under the law of this house, you don't have any freedom unless your father and I say otherwise."

It seemed rather a rum deal to me, but I knew better than to say so. I looked over at Davy, to see how she felt about this miscarriage of freedom, but she didn't seem all that phased by it. I suppose, when you're a baby, freedom doesn't matter because there's nothing you could do with it even if you had it.

It was closing time at the bar. The bar to which I refer is of course the Ice Cream Bar, a wittily obnoxious name for a terribly delicious place. I hated myself for going there, family in tow, but I still went there, and I still ate far too much ice cream and allowed myself to be winked at by Marge, the lady behind the counter, when I ordered my third Double Trouble. If the Ice Cream Bar had been a burlesque house, I wouldn't have felt more guilt, and certainly couldn't

have gotten so much enjoyment out of it, since I wasn't entirely sure what a burlesque house was, and even if I had known I wouldn't have found it all that interesting.

The Double Trouble was my poison of choice, and three of their empty bowls were sitting in front of me, still covered with the dregs of the horrifying concoction of which they had so quickly been emptied. The Double Trouble was two scoops, your choice, although I always got chocolate, with every sauce the Bar had, plus any topping you could name. And when I say scoop, I don't mean a melon ball. I refer, of course, to the legendary Spoon which Marge kept behind the counter, a Spoon which seemed like It could not possibly hold as much ice cream as It plopped into a dish or onto a cone, a Spoon which called to me every time I went in the door.

"Hi Tony," It would say. I'm not sure why the Spoon felt It should call me Tony, since that wasn't my name, or even a name that was close to my name. Still, it called me Tony.

"Hey Spoon," I would say, carefully, because I knew that I wasn't supposed to be talking to spoons.

"Long time no see pal. Whatcha been doing?"

"Oh, the usual." I would always say this, even though I'm not completely sure what the usual was, since nothing in my life was all that usual.

"Good man," the Spoon would say. "I've got a Double Trouble I'm just dying to serve you; we got in the new banana syrup today." I would always seem excited about the syrups, even though they were always strange and unusual and never actually appeared on my Double Trouble. I knew better than to ask Marge for them. Kumquat syrup, I knew, was merely a figment of my imagination, or possibly of the Spoon's, if I wasn't imagining It. Sometimes I knew It was lying simply because the flavor didn't even make sense. Asphalt syrup, potato fluff syrup, hair syrup; It would say many strange and unusual things, and I would always act excited because I knew I wouldn't have to eat them. Only once did I call It on its lie; the time It said the new syrup was motor oil. It didn't talk to me for a month after that, and I checked my Double Trouble every time just to make sure there wasn't any motor oil on it.

But the Double Trouble was a sinful concoction and no mistake. Eating one was sinful, eating two was daring, and eating three was just plain stupid. I always ate three, and afterward I always went home and lay in my bed staring at the ceiling, vowing that I would never eat another Double Trouble again. Had I been older, this cycle might have resulted in alcoholism or something similarly nasty, so I suppose I should have been glad it was just ice cream and that we only went to the Ice Cream Bar once a week.

Actually, after my father lost his job, we went to the Ice Cream Bar significantly fewer times than once a week. Once a month was the norm, and often we would only go once every six or seven weeks, which I should have felt thankful for, if only because it helped keep me from gaining several hundred pounds from eating so many Double Troubles. Instead, I simply felt I needed to eat more when we did go. I was like a bear, storing fat for hibernation, only I was storing Double Troubles against the coming lean times.

This was why, after eating three Double Troubles, I was steeling myself mentally to prepare for a fourth. A lesser kid might have balked at this challenge, or settled for a single scoop, but it was a Double Trouble or nothing for me. For a moment, it looked like it might be nothing, as my stomach cried out in protest and my belt creaked. But then I gathered my wits and my courage, stood up from the booth, and marched haltingly over to the counter. Marge looked a little surprised to see me again, and I was a little unsure as to whether or not I should just wait for a few minutes to let the previous troubles settle before I ordered their successor, but it was last call, and there was no waiting.

"Another," I said. It came out a little strange, and I think Marge was tempted to make some comment, perhaps to tell me I'd had enough, or to tease me for my gluttony. But she saw the look in my eye and wisely opted to serve me the climactic Trouble. The Spoon seemed to grin maniacally as it served up two of the largest scoops I'd ever seen. The sauce poured on, the topping of choice, cookie crumbs, descended, and I was presented with what might be my undoing. A fourth Double Trouble.

Then my mother intervened. "What in the world are you doing?" she asked as I was reaching to take the object of my desire. "You've had three already."

"I want another," I said, rather stupidly I realized a moment after saying it. My mother was not going to buy it.

She didn't. "I don't care if you do want another," she informed me sternly. "We're going and we're not buying you another."

"But she already made it," I said. This was what I should have started with; my mother was susceptible to the pressures of embarrassment and hated to inconvenience other people.

"Well, that's not my fault is it?" my mother said. She was not relenting. My brain held a frantic conference, during which I'm afraid I must have looked rather stupid, and hurriedly decided to cut losses and bail out.

"Okay, fine, let's go," I said. The look in my mother's face told me that bailing was no longer an option. I was a fighter pilot frantically pulling at his control stick as his plane streaked closer and closer to the ground. I was a sea captain watching in horror as a torpedo pulsed ever closer to my ship. I was a deer in the headlights. My sole thought was, "Wha!" Not the sound one makes when one is confused, but a sound of pure terror.

"It's already been made," my mother said, and for a brief instant I saw a glimmer of hope. The window slammed shut. "But you didn't ask whether or not you could have it, so I guess you'll just have to pay for it yourself. She can't unmake it; you've bought it, you pay for it."

Mayday! SOS! This couldn't be happening. I couldn't pay for the Double Trouble; it would bankrupt me. "But I can't do that!" I said. "If I do, I won't have any money left over to buy books!"

Then my brain caught up with my mouth and registered exactly what it was I'd just said. I was no longer worried about paying for the Double Trouble; my future in this world was at stake. I would gladly have paid for a thousand Double Troubles if I could have unspoken those words. My parents now knew I was buying books with my allowance money! They would want to know what books. They would want to know how I'd bought the books. They would tell Lester's parents. He would never speak to me again, let alone buy me books, and I wouldn't be able to buy the books anyway because my parents would lock me in the basement, where I wouldn't even be able to read the books I already owned. I was doomed.

My mother shrugged. "Well then Lester will just have to wait a little longer for your money," she said with a slight smile in the corners of her mouth. "You really shouldn't let him charge you so much anyway."

For my birthday, I knew what I wanted. I wanted a copy of *Ivanhoe*. It wasn't pulp, certainly, but lately, since the new looser restrictions on my reading had taken effect, I wasn't so interested in pulp because I had to pay for it. Certainly, the eighth volume of *Saga of the Dark Knights* was out, and I wanted to read it, but it was expensive and library books were free.

My mother took me to the library every Thursday. This was to compensate for the fact that, while my father had another job at the mine, it didn't pay nearly as much as it used to, so

my allowance and my visits to the Ice Cream Bar suffered, among other things. I didn't miss my allowance very much since I could now get books on a regular basis, but Lester certainly did.

"It's not fair," he said in a whining tone that spoke volumes about his character. "You haven't bought a book in forever, and now my dad has started to bring them home for me even though I don't ask him to. He says I should read more. I don't want to read those stupid books. Anyway, I read plenty. I read Archie, and Peanuts, and Super Man, and a bunch of other comics."

I let him talk. Most children my age felt the same way about reading, I'd found. They thought that comic books were the be-all and end-all of literature, and they scoffed at the idea that any fun could come from a book the size of the ones I usually read. Mostly this was because they were stupid, but it was also the fault of the school. Dick and Jane, followed by hour upon hour of reading from idiotic text books written by people with the mental capacity of grapefruit, has a stultifying effect on the brain, and sometimes even I felt rather fed up with the whole chore of reading.

Mrs. Lee was a firm believer in the three Rs, and that meant that we did a lot of reading and writing of stupid things. Lester liked to spend his time when he was supposed to be writing doodling little drawings of super heroes in the margins of his books, an act which always got him into trouble at the end of the school year. This never deterred him.

I spent my time when I was supposed to be writing actually writing, but not the assigned text. Rather, I would write fanciful little stories about explorers and dragons and pirates and so forth, which always got me into trouble at the end of class. You'd think that getting into trouble with such regularity would have taught me to do the writing I was supposed to be doing, but I would invariably begin writing, grow bored, and continue the text, but with completely made-up words. Thus it was that Dick and Jane found El Dorado, Spot was killed by a cannon ball aboard the dread ship Disembowel, and Mr. Jones gained all of his astounding magical powers.

I was quite taken with the word disembowel, and I would work it into as many things as I could. This made for very interesting History reports, if nothing else. The dread ship Disembowel could often be seen sailing the waters of my imagination, crewed with all sorts of people. After I read a book about the Wild West, the pirates would mostly be Indians, usually Sioux, and they would have shoot-outs with ships crewed entirely by the Sailing United States Cavalry. When I was in a more magical mood, the dread ship took on a different shape and sailed the seas of lost worlds unknown to science, seeking magical treasure and blasting its enemies with enchantments and fireballs.

Mrs. Lee did not look kindly upon the dread ship Disembowel, nor on any of its crew members, whoever they were. Consequently, the only way I managed not to get in more serious trouble with the school and my parents was that she could never get my grades to drop low enough. I always did very well on tests, and while I might have been interested in things not related to the report, and occasionally slip one or two in, my reports and presentations were always excellent, even if they were about pulp novels.

In fact, after my changed status re the acquiring of books, my forays into unacceptable texts were much reduced. Thus, Mrs. Lee had to put up with a certain amount of the discursive quality in my writing assignments, as they were always very neat.

Lester was still bellyaching. "I told you," I said, interrupting, "my parents can't give me as much allowance, and I had to pay for some things that I needed."

"Well what am I supposed to do with all these books?" asked Lester.

"You could give them to me," I said. I might have turned over a new leaf as far as

reading material was concerned, but that didn't make me any less eager for free reading material, and if it happened to be pulp, well, I could handle it.

Lester laughed. "Fat chance," he said nastily. "I've got to get my money's worth out of them."

I neglected to point out that, since he hadn't paid for them and since he didn't want them, the best way to get what he paid for them out of them was to get rid of them. I was sure that this train of logic would be stalled in the station where Lester was concerned. Now that I didn't need him as a supplier, I was rather less forgiving in my judgments of him.

"So why do we have to read this stuff anyway?" asked Raul, posing a very good question to which there was no very good answer. "I mean, I like to read, but not this stuff."

"They make us do it because they think we're dumb," I said. It was as good an answer as any, although it wasn't really fair, since I thought most kids were dumb, and that had little to do with what they learned in school. "They don't think we can read good books, so they give us things to read that they expect will be easy enough."

"What are good books?" asked Raul. For a moment I thought he was asking me what I meant by good books, but then I realized he was looking for recommendations. Now I had to be very careful.

"Well, *Robin Hood* is a good book," I said, picking something easy and not terribly incriminating. "What kinds of things do you like to read about?"

"It does not sound like studying is going on out here, I think," said Mr. Ximenez as he came around the corner and heard us talking. Mr. Ximenez was the only person I knew who could stay in the school after the time when Mrs. Inglis had decided everyone needed to be out. Even teachers left when Mrs. Inglis said that sort of thing, but Mr. Ximenez somehow weathered all the storms she threw at him. Actually, he had every reason to be there, given the fact that he was the only thing that kept the school running, but Mrs. Inglis, I'm sure, probably didn't see it that way.

"We were studying," Raul said. "I was asking about reading, for school, you know."

"Oh ho, so maybe you were talking of comic books," Mr. Ximenez laughed. "I do not think that Mrs. Lee wants you to be reading those."

"No, really Mr. Ximenez, Raul wanted to read some good books," I said, defending him. In reality, Mr. Ximenez was only joking, and I knew he was joking, so the defense was only for Raul's benefit. He still appreciated it, even though he too knew his father was playing around with us.

"Good books?" asked Mr. Ximenez as he came up to the porch and sat on the step next to us. "Are the books you read in school not good books?"

"We don't really read books, we just read from our textbooks," I said. I wasn't sure where the conversation was going. Maybe Mr. Ximenez, like my mother, could be trusted with my secret. I hoped so. Anyway, since my reading restrictions had loosened, I had been feeling much less shy about talking about my reading, and not just to friends. I even told Mullins the plot from *Ivanhoe* over three recesses, and while I was no Walter Scott, and I'm sure I exaggerated a few things and left a few things out, Mullins seemed to enjoy it.

"But you, Jeffrey, you read these good books?" asked Mr. Ximenez. "What kind of books?"

"Oh... you know," I stalled. My brain raced. Then, without stopping to reason it out, I just made a decision. "I used to read a lot of dime-store paperbacks, and I liked them, but now I

get books from the library."

"Ah yes," said Mr. Ximenez, smiling. "I go there sometimes, in the morning, when I have no work, you know. I particularly like the science books; nature is so beautiful. Have you read any books of that kind?"

I hadn't, actually; my mind was most often drawn to the fiction section and I'd never even glanced into non-fiction beyond the history books. Mr. Ximenez saw this in my face without me answering, but instead of telling me I should, he simply went on. "Raul and his mother, they are not so much scientists." He laughed. "Mama, she likes romances, yes?" He was asking Raul, but he might as well have been asking me, because I thought about it for a moment. Did my mother read anything at all? Certainly I had never seen her reading, but I wasn't home for much of the day, and I went to bed quite early, or at least I felt that way.

My bed time was something of a struggle between me, my mother, my father, and Davy. Davy only contributed in that sometimes she refused to sleep, and so my mother had to see to her, and as a result I was not put to bed. My mother wanted me asleep before eight o'clock, but she was willing to compromise if I was in my room and stayed quiet, especially when Davy was filibustering. My father felt that I should be asleep by seven o'clock, and there was no convincing him otherwise. We usually finished dinner at around seven, so his rule was hard to follow. On weekends, I certainly didn't want to be asleep by seven, and so I would avoid my father after dinner so he couldn't command me to get my tush upstairs, as he would often do. During the summer, it was still daylight out at seven, even at eight, so I sometimes could get away with later bedtimes, but any time I seemed to be sleeping past ten o'clock the next day, my father would reinstate martial law and to bed at seven I would go. My mother usually turned a blind eye to the fact that I wasn't sleeping but rather reading.

"It's hard for Mama to find books though," said Raul. I wondered why, not knowing of course that the local library was unlikely to stock many books in French. "She tells such stories, even without books. I don't know where they come from."

Mr. Ximenez laughed again. "Your Mama, she is full of surprises," he said. "One day soon our friend should meet her. Maybe he would like to hear some of her stories."

Raul started to say something, but Mr. Ximenez gave him a look which said "Quiet" about as clearly as I've ever seen a look speak. I wondered just what Mrs. Ximenez would look like, and what her stories would be about. I hoped they might be about Spain. None of the Ximenezes had ever been to Spain, so it was unlikely, but I didn't know that, and it was just as well, since sometimes illusions are all one has in life.

Today we were learning about amphibians. This might appeal to some people, but to me it was just another excuse for Mrs. Lee to make us touch slimy things. I wasn't a clean child by any means, but I didn't like slime or gunk or any of the other nouns which define various states of matter that people find unpleasant, tactilely speaking. I was always afraid it would seep into my pores and work its way up into my brain, and no amount of precaution could prevent me from so thinking.

Mrs. Lee had a thankless job really, and that was why I liked her. I liked underdogs. She had to teach Third Grade at a backwoods little elementary school named after someone no one could recall, and she had to teach it to all of us to boot. We were not an easy bunch to teach. Leaving aside me and Raul and Mullins, whom we've already met, there were still a great many troublesome children in one way or another.

Frank liked to burp. He thought it was the greatest thing ever. He'd been taught to make

himself burp by his brother at the beginning of the year, and he took great pride and joy in his abilities, going so far as to practice them in class. Needless to say, this was not on Mrs. Lee's lesson plan.

Jennin was named after her great-grandmother who had been Turkish or something similar, and she never spoke above a whisper and always wore a scarf around her head and face so even that whisper couldn't be heard. Mrs. Lee understood the scarf, knowing that Jennin was Muslim, but she didn't understand why Jennin wouldn't talk properly.

At least Jennin was quiet. Gus was not quiet. He had no problem answering any question you might ask him, at the top of his voice, with no regard for decorum or tact. He was quite smart, as the school measured things, and was actually a year younger than we all were, so Mrs. Lee put up with him, but she didn't like it. Actually, Gus was only four months younger than me, and he was only on the sevens, but I kept quiet about that. Mrs. Lee thought I was still on the fives, and I wanted it to stay that way.

The reason I pretended to be dumber than I actually was was because I'd developed it as a survival mechanism. In Kindergarten I had allowed my teacher, Mrs. Potts, to learn that I could already read, and so for the rest of the year she gave me twice as much work and made sure it was twice as hard. After that I played dumb. I was bored whether I was being "challenged" or not, and if I wasn't being challenged I had more time to read, so I made sure everyone thought I was being challenged when I wasn't. This method is actually rather effective, as long as you're careful, and I lived a relatively challenge-free school life.

Challenges, however, are not made equal, and what bored me challenged the bejeezus out of Pol, whom we called Pol because it wasn't quite "Pole," and he wasn't quite Polish, although his name certainly was. I believe it was actually Szheniknsz, and that was just his first name, so in the interests of our sanity we called him Pol, and made sure not to pronounce it "Pole". Pol was not stupid, he was just nearly blind and was always losing his glasses. Consequently, because he knew he'd be punished if Mrs. Lee found out he couldn't find them, Pol pretended to know what was going on up on the blackboard, but Mrs. Lee could have been writing Sanskrit for all he knew. He did fairly well answering questions as long as he didn't have to read something, and it was then that he had trouble. Mrs. Lee was convinced she had a retard on her hands.

Then there were Kenneth, Scott, Dalton, and Marvin, rounding out our little male band of idiots. They were all the same: not too bright, not too creative, and not too attentive. They never failed anything, but they never really succeeded either.

On the other side of the coin were Sam, Inga, Lois, Pamela, and Leek. Sam was really Samantha, but since she could beat up pretty much anyone else in the class it seemed rather wrong to call her anything but Sam. Inga was shockingly blonde, to the point where she had to wear a hat and sunglasses when she went out for recess, even on cloudy days. Her parents were Irish farmers who'd moved from Louisiana, so it was anyone's guess why Inga was named Inga and why she was Nordic-ly blonde. Lois and Pamela were boring and average, and would probably grow up and marry nice respectable men and keep nice respectable houses, and thus were beneath my notice.

Then there was Leek. Her name was Branwen but her parents called her their little leek and so everyone else called her Leek. She spent most of her time in class staring out the window as if she would rather be out running through the fields. She would have been much happier doing that, but since she had to go to school she went barefoot and never wore a coat no matter what the weather, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. I don't think Mrs. Lee

minded Leek, seeing as how they almost shared a name, and though I didn't know it, Mrs. Lee was actually rather taken with Branwen because she saw something of the same romantic spirit in the child. All this passed below my radar screen at the time; I just thought Leek was funny. She could sing funny little songs in her funny little voice and dance funny little jigs which I found quite amusing. She reminded me just a bit of Davy, actually.

So when Mrs. Lee said we were going to study amphibians, what she actually meant was that whoever she called on was going to study amphibians and everyone else would either continue doing whatever it was they always did, or half-heartedly study amphibians and be secretly glad they hadn't been called up to the front. Of course, whenever there was slime involved, Mrs. Lee invariably picked me. It was almost as if she knew I didn't like slime and was either deriving sadistic pleasure out of forcing me to deal with it or was trying to cure me of my phobia. I didn't begrudge her either way; as I said, I knew she had a thankless job and so if she wanted to get her jollies by making me paw through muck, I didn't hold it against her. I didn't want to do it and wished she wouldn't make me, but I didn't question her motives.

However, on this particular day Mrs. Lee made Inga study amphibians, and I was able to spend the larger part of my time thinking about the subject of freedom, and what exactly I was going to write about. I only had three more days, and I hadn't put pen to paper, partially because I was a bit disillusioned with the whole concept. Freedom didn't seem to be all that great to me, and I certainly couldn't see the use in dying for it, although I was sorry that various people had had to.

We were going to visit my aunt. This was normal; every year at around this time the entire family would pile into the car with about two tons of belongings per person, and we would all drive the seven hours to Breaktree, where my aunt and uncle lived. I hated being in the car for that long, not because I didn't like being cooped up, but because I was unable to read in the car. I'd discovered the hard way that reading in the car made me violently nauseated; this fact had become very apparent when I'd thrown up all over my copy of *Ingmar the Terrible*, which, while not my favorite book by any means, was still a book. It still smelled funny, which was perhaps why I didn't read it very often, and then always outside.

So for seven hours all I could do was talk or sing or be quiet, and the lion's share of the time was devoted to the latter. Quiet time didn't bother me that much in short doses, or when I wanted quiet, but seven hours of it was enough to set my nerves on edge. Thus it was that whenever we visited my aunt, I would always do something during the visit that made my parents mad at me or made my cousin cry.

My cousin was four, and she was not a very mature four. So she would very easily get on my nerves, and since my nerves were already frayed from the ride and my temper was short, I would invariably say something the wrong way or too harshly, and either she would cry, or my parents would hear me say it and punish me. Once it was both, and that was certainly the visit that we didn't like to talk about.

I would often ask why my aunt and uncle couldn't come visit us, but my parents never gave me a straight answer. I presumed it was because their house was large and expensive and ours was small and not so. This wasn't far from the truth, since my father secretly despised my uncle, who was only family by marriage, and held the fact that my uncle wouldn't visit our house against him, and hated him for having a nicer house. This would have been unfair except that my uncle hated my father, who was only his family by marriage, and felt that my father was a poor influence on his sister, my aunt, and that he was also something of an embarrassment to my

uncle, who was a lawyer and traveled in very different circles from the rest of us. So every year, my uncle would get my aunt to make my father come to them, and every year my father would pretend to be fine with the arrangement but would secretly want to refuse and make my uncle stoop to our level.

My mother and my aunt got along famously, which was fine because my mother and my aunt were always the ones who arranged these things anyway. My grandmother, of course, loved both her children, but not enough to not dislike my uncle for his heathen ways, nor enough to keep from slapping my father for not showing enough Christian charity whenever he would complain about my uncle, even though my grandmother secretly agreed with him.

I liked my aunt, because she was a nice person and also because, even though she was only rich because her husband was rich, she always got me great presents for Christmas and my birthday. That was enough to like my uncle as well, and as far as he was concerned, both Davy and I couldn't be held accountable for our parentage, so he tried very hard to win us away from my father. Davy would have none of it, especially since she didn't seem to care what she got for Christmas or her birthday. I'd gotten her a block of wood on which I'd painted her name, and she liked that just as much as the rattle she got from my aunt and uncle.

I didn't like my cousin, and she didn't like me. She took great pains to make my life as miserable as possible, knowing that I couldn't do anything about it. She would try to tear my books, throw blocks and toys at me, and be as loud as she could whenever she knew I wanted quiet. Of course, no one else saw it that way; they thought she was just being a kid. I knew better.

This was why, strangely enough, I spent most of my time when I was at my aunt's house with my grandmother, because she didn't like my cousin, not in a hateful way, just in a way that said, "Kid, when you get old enough to behave, then I'll like you as family, and I might even try to ignore the fact that your father is such a heathen, but for right now, you are not welcome." Actually, I'm sure it didn't say that in so many words, but whatever it said, it was effective.

"Pass the butter dear," said my aunt sweetly. Everything my aunt did was sweet, to the point that, while I still loved her, it sometimes became too sweet to handle. The house was decorated with sweet things: little ceramic figurines of cute animals, floral paintings, pictures of the family with sweet smiles on their faces; it was enough to give one indigestion.

My father passed the butter. He was seated immediately to the left of my uncle, and they both were truly enjoying the experience. And by enjoying, I mean that they were both inwardly fuming and outwardly being painfully polite just to spite each other.

"I think Davy might have a tooth coming in," said my mother to my aunt, and my aunt made the appropriate noises. That end of the table was boring. My father's end was boring too, but for a different reason. I was stuck looking at both ends from the small table, where I was sitting with my sister and my cousin and, for some reason or other, my grandmother. I think she was sitting at the table because she didn't feel like dealing with either of her children at the moment, and so even real children seemed like pleasant company in comparison. At that moment she was trying to get Davy to eat a green been.

"Green vegetables are good for the brain," she said, and on what evidence she based this statement I have no idea. I wasn't sure either whether or not Davy really needed any help in the brain department, but I supposed it couldn't hurt.

"What's that Mom?" asked my mother. She was the only one who called my grandmother "Mom," even though two of my grandmother's actual children were right there in

the house as well.

"Oh, just saying how vitamins are good for you," said my grandmother, quite civilly for once. "Except vitamin K. You know why they didn't keep going with the alphabet after E, boy?" She was obviously talking to me, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Still, it beat listening to my cousin, and when my grandmother was talking, my cousin usually kept quiet. Not only was my uncle very big on children not speaking unless spoken to, but my grandmother felt that my cousin would learn to be normal much more quickly if she was given the proper corporal encouragement. Usually my mother or my aunt would intervene before my cousin got slapped, but they weren't paying attention now, so my cousin knew enough to keep quiet.

"Why?" I asked, more because it seemed like the sensible thing to say in this situation than for any other reason.

"Well, they had a vitamin F, but they found out that it wasn't good for people at all," said my grandmother in a low voice. "I think Satan must have had a hand in it; He's fond of science." My grandmother took a somewhat dim view of many things scientific, although she said the automobile was the greatest invention and that Henry Ford was a holy man. I never understood her stance on cars until I had the opportunity to ride a horse, and then I quickly became a convert. Horses were much worse than even the worst car.

"What do you mean, it wasn't good for people?" I asked, a little curious now. This was definitely one of those times when my grandmother was either lying through her teeth or was telling truths my parents wouldn't want me to hear. She did the former often, even though she said she despised lying and that it was a sin against Jesus. She did the latter less often, but it was through her that I knew what various words meant. She didn't do it out of titillation or any base motive like that, and the words weren't swear words, but they were certainly the kind of words which made certain portions of the Bible more interesting than others, and probably played a large part in making many of the books I enjoyed unwholesome. It was also through her that I knew some particularly exciting stories about people in the Bible, stories that definitely weren't covered in any Sunday School. I think she viewed that last as a sort of missionary work; she knew I could be appealed to by lurid accounts, so she gave me what I wanted, but tried to insert a bit of Christianity as well. The lurid accounts took. The Christianity didn't. It wasn't that I didn't like Jesus, or that I thought the faith was wrong, it was just that I felt that it was a pity to spoil such good stories with a homily at the end.

"Well," my grandmother went on, "they tried it out on some people after they discovered it, and it turned their skin completely blue and made them go mad." She looked deadly serious, so serious that I couldn't tell whether she was lying or not. I pressed on. Even if she was lying, this was still more entertaining that a lot of things she could have been talking about.

"So what did they do then? How did they get vitamin K?"

"They got rid of all the vitamin F they had, swept the whole thing under the rug," went on my grandmother. "Then they kept going and found vitamin G. That one made people explode. So they went through all the other vitamins, because if they didn't find another vitamin, the vitamin pill makers wouldn't pay them."

"And every single one was bad for people?" I asked, with a certain amount of incredulity I might add. I might have been inexperienced in the world of vitamins, but there was a limit to what I was willing to believe.

"Every single one, boy," said my grandmother, still deadly serious. "But they found that as they went farther into the alphabet, they started getting less and less bad for you. Vitamin I only killed half the people they tested it on, and vitamin J just made everyone sick. Then, after

they discovered K, they couldn't discover any more. So, since vitamin K only makes your hair fall out, they decided to put just a little bit of it into vitamin pills and say that only a little bit was healthy."

"And no one ever found out," I said, not questioning, just assuming that this was where the whole story was going.

"What are you talking about?" asked my grandmother. "Politicians can't keep anything a secret. Everyone found out, but no one believed it. Your Gramps didn't believe it, and he just kept taking those vitamin pills with the vitamin K in them, and all his hair fell out." She looked at me long and hard. "It'll happen to you too boy," she said. "You don't eat enough vegetables. You're going to get all filled up with vitamin K."

"Mom, what are you telling the boy?" asked my mother with a smile on her face as she came up behind us. "Vitamins aren't named after letters in the alphabet because they came in order. They're named after letters because of their chemical names."

"See, she doesn't believe me either," said my grandmother. "Godless heathens, the lot of you, and pretty soon, you'll all be bald." That said, she returned to her plate and wouldn't say anything else on the subject.

My mother might have been smart enough to know the real reason behind vitamin names, and then again she might not have been. My money was increasingly on my mother in matters of this sort, but I couldn't help but think back to my grandmother in her church, and the way that she'd looked. Sometimes, when she was telling me stories like that, her eyes would get that same look in them. Funnily enough, it was usually when she was telling the truth.

It was day three and I was sick of it. I was sick of my aunt being relentlessly sweet. I was sick of my uncle and my father hating each other's guts in silence. I was definitely sick of my cousin, who had taken to singing various songs she knew by heart at the top of her lungs, something which my mother and my aunt said was precious and an example of great talent, and something which I in turn felt was at least on par with keelhauling.

Davy and I spent most of our day in the only room in the house where we could get some peace: my grandmother's room. Davy had been supplied, somehow, with an inexhaustible supply of crayons, and she was trying to draw something large and complicated on a big piece of poster board which my father had bought. My father was a very stingy man in most cases, but when Davy was involved, he seemed to turn into Rockefeller. She had merely to point at a particular item and it could be hers. Since she never wanted anything terribly expensive, this wasn't all that much trouble for the family.

I was sitting with my head sticking out from under the bed, thinking. I had already read both books I had brought, and apparently my aunt and uncle didn't believe in books, since there were none about for me to read. So I thought. It wasn't as boring as it sounds; I had quite an active imagination, and it was hardly difficult to pull a few threads here and there and have a merry puppet show of some of the choicer bits.

Mostly I was thinking about Mr. Ximenez. Sir Domingo, Knight of the Purple Glove, was forever striding forth and battling huge monsters or wizards or other knights, and while his armor occasionally got dinged and his steed occasionally threw him, both he and I knew that this was just for dramatic effect. Sir Domingo had received the Purple Glove from the hand of the fair Lady Marie, daughter of Duke Percivale of Agincourt, which sounded better than the sense it made, so thus it was.

I wasn't infatuated with Mr. Ximenez; far from it. I had seen that type of thing happen to

many kids before. Lynne had spent an entire year mooning over the new music teacher, Mr. Frick, because he looked a little more like Rock Hudson than Tip did. Tip hadn't been bothered by the change in Lynne's affections; he hadn't even noticed.

Lynne had found every excuse she could to be around Mr. Frick, and she would give him little presents and draw pictures for him. As she was in Second Grade at the time, Mr. Frick had known exactly where she was coming from, and he had humored her but occasionally mentioned in passing his various flaws as an object of affection. Chief among these was his wife, Mrs. Frick. At first, Lynne had refused to believe that Mrs. Frick existed, and then when she had seen the woman in person, she had burst into tears and run out of the room sobbing. Such was love, and I wanted no part of it.

I wasn't in love with Mr. Ximenez, I was merely interested in him. He seemed to provide an enigma that was in need of solving. He, my mother, and Davy were my puzzling bread and butter, with occasional insertions of various things about my grandmother. Since I could leave no mystery I encountered unsolved, I spent rather a good deal of time puzzling over each one in turn.

My mother was the least interesting. I knew that she knew more than she let on, and while I wasn't sure why, at least she had begun to see that I knew more than I let on, and so an agreement of sorts could be formed between us. She revealed little bits of her unseen knowledge to me, and in return I pretended not to know what she knew about my knowledge. It was rather simple, though stated in quite a complicated manner.

My grandmother only provided the occasional interesting bit. I didn't know what my grandmother was up to sometimes, and I was fairly certain that I wouldn't find out. But occasionally, as had been the case when she took me to church, she would show her cards to me for an instant, so to speak. Then I would glimpse just how much she was up to, but not what it was nor why, and this discouraged me.

Mr. Ximenez was interesting from many angles. First off, he treated me differently from any other adult, almost as if he saw through my disguise. I wasn't ready to surrender that point just yet, but it remained a possibility in the back of my mind. Then too there was the business with his foreign origins, fictional though they may have been. Lastly, and probably not leastly, there was Mrs. Ximenez. She was the prize at the end of the maze, and one day soon I hoped to unravel all the pieces and get there.

My sister Davy was the most difficult, and consequently the puzzle I spent the most amount of time thinking about. I didn't think about her in the same way as all the other puzzles though; I thought about her as if she were a cipher I had to crack. There was no hidden mystery to Davy, no prize, no maze, not even forbidden knowledge. All there was was a little baby who was more than she seemed, and I just wanted to ask her all about it. The code was not an easy one to break, however, and thus far, our communications were strictly non-verbal, but I hoped that one day, maybe a long time from where I was, meaningful communication could take place. I had a feeling that Davy felt the same way, but just as I was stymied by her, she seemed to be quite stymied by me and everyone else.

I looked over at her and tried to guess what she was drawing. It could have been a space ship, or a death ray, or even a perpetual motion machine; the blueprint was there, but the labels were missing. She scowled suddenly and corrected a line with an earnestness that made me laugh quietly to myself. Perhaps it wasn't so bad being trapped in here if it meant that I could really work on the Davy code.

"Oooh, look who's come crawling back."

"Shut up Spoon."

"Well, it's good you made it anyway, because we've got double-fudge ripple syrup back in stock."

"Back in stock? You never had it in the first place."

"Well, we have it now. So why not have it on the next one?"

"I'm not having another."

"Oh really."

"Really."

"Okay then Tony, if you're sure you don't want another..."

"I want another, I'm just not having another."

"What's this crap with the self-control all of a sudden."

"If I have another I'll have to pay for it."

"So what else are you going to spend your money on?"

"Books."

"Books? Get real Tony, the only book worth reading is the list of flavors from the Ice Cream Bar."

"Then you must get really bored having to read it over and over."

"Books are for suckers."

"Then I guess I'm a sucker. But I'm not sucker enough to buy another."

"Your loss Tony, your loss."

Mrs. Lee was sick. Or she was dead. Or possibly she'd returned to her home planet for instructions. Depending on to whom you listened, she might be hiding in the classroom checking to see what we said about her when she wasn't there. I listened to the substitute, who said she was sick.

It wasn't that I was being attentive, I just didn't buy any of the other explanations. I didn't expect Mrs. Lee to lie, but I wouldn't have put it past her either. So I hedged my bets and, while I believed she was sick, I made any plans for other eventualities I could make without complicated equipment.

"All right Jeffrey, please do problem two on the board for us," said Mrs. Broadnik. She was definitely old, not old like Mrs. Lee; she had white hair and was quite fat and tired easily. She didn't want to get up from her desk unless absolutely necessary, and since we'd had her as a substitute before, we knew the drill. She didn't give us any trouble as long as we didn't give her any trouble.

As I was laboring my way through problem two, trying to make it as obvious as possible that I wasn't smart enough to really grasp the concept, the intercom crackled and then the voice of the Principal spat out. The Principal, Mr. Scree, was a mysterious figure; you only saw him occasionally at school events or if you'd done something particularly bad. Every morning he would announce things, and one never knew exactly what those things would be. They could be disciplinary, or they could be news items, or they could even just be proverbs that the Principal thought we should hear. No one ever called him Mr. Scree either, except Mrs. Inglis, and I'd only heard her do it once when I wasn't supposed to.

"I'd just like to begin by congratulating our Sixth Graders for winning the canned food drive last month," the Principal began, signaling that this might be a rather mundane announcement. "I hope you all enjoyed your little vacation. And I'd like to congratulate

everyone who participated in our Presidential Essay Contest. We got the results back today and, while no one in the school made it to the finals, we had some very good essays from all grades, even the First Graders. I'd like to announce that Raul Ximenez has won the school prize for best esay." The Principal continued congratulating Raul and we all turned and stared at him.

Raul never won anything. I had been surprised to hear that he had even turned an essay in, and felt sure that, even though he had, it would doubtless be profane and he would get in trouble. I must confess I had forgotten the essay contest and even Raul's entry completely, and now, while I was happy for Raul, I was a bit sad that my own essay had not been picked.

"And lastly, Jeffrey," and here the Principal said my name, which perked up my ears, "please report to my office immediately."

This was bad. This was very very bad. If ever I had called upon the protection of God before, all those previous times were instantly trumped. "God, I know I don't pray to You often, and that I sometimes do things which might make You angry, but I'm just a little kid and my grandmother says she prays for me, which must count for something since she's very close to You. So, since I'm so young, I'd like to ask that you please protect me and don't let me die." It was a heartfelt prayer, if a little self-serving. My classmates all swiveled from Raul to look at me.

Mrs. Broadnik coughed. "Well Jeffrey, I guess you had better go to the Principal's office, and our star of the day, Raul, can finish your problem for you."

Raul, as he passed me on the way to the black board, whispered something reassuring, but I was praying so hard I only got the gist of it. Out into the hallway I slowly marched, like a prisoner being led to the gallows. This was bad.

"It's my fault," said my father grimly as he sat with my mother on the couch. They were talking about me, but they didn't seem terribly angry. "He just got the wrong ideas, and it must have been from me and his grandmother talking politics."

"No, no, it's not your fault," said my mother kindly. "The boy's young and sometimes when we're young we think strange things. Maybe he just put two and two together on his own. He's a smart enough boy." I was glad my mother was standing up for my intelligence, even though my father was mostly right about from where I'd gotten it.

"It's the school!" said my grandmother shortly. "They think they can just silence the truth. The boy's smarter than the lot of them, and they just can't take it."

"But Mom, they're just concerned that he might not be learning properly," said my mother. "They don't want to silence him, they just want to make sure he's not getting the wrong ideas."

"The right ideas, you mean," said my grandmother. I was glad my grandmother was sticking up for my ideas, even though my mother was mostly right about my learning.

"Both of you stop fighting about it," said my father. "What matters is that they're concerned and we should be too. We don't want to be raising a violent child."

This was the first I'd heard about violence in this conversation, which had started several hours ago in the Principal's office. I wasn't entirely sure what violence had to do with the situation, but being as I was at the center of it, I conceded that perhaps I didn't have a good perspective on things. All I knew was that I certainly didn't feel violent, and if I sounded that way in writing, all that needed to be changed was my writing style.

"They're not only concerned about that," said my mother. "They think the boy is having this problem because he's too smart for his grade. His teacher said that she noticed that the boy

was spending a lot of time thinking instead of working."

I was aghast. I had thought I'd hidden it so well. I would have to try harder, because if I was bored now, I would be just as bored in another grade, only I would be overworked and also the youngest in the class.

"So what's wrong with thinking?" asked my grandmother reasonably. I silently cheered her on. "God gave him the brain he's got so he can think with it."

"I've been noticing that Jeffrey's much smarter than most kids his age," said my father. "He quoted Shakespeare to me a few nights ago. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but now..."

"Well, I've been seeing it too," said my mother. "He's reading longer and longer books. He said he wanted *Ivanhoe* for his birthday. And not a child's version either; the real deal."

"The boy is smart as a whip and he can see what he wants to do with it," said my grandmother. "Although I personally don't agree with his choice of reading. He should read the Bible, and then maybe Brother Leon's book."

"Mom, it's not a question of what the subject matter is," said my mother.

"Well, actually, it might be," said my father. "You know all those paperbacks he reads. Maybe he got this from one of them."

"Foul heathens the lot of them," said my grandmother, referring I assume to the authors of paperbacks, although she might also have been talking about the school, or even politicians. There was no real way of telling. Anyway, I didn't really care to know, because I was trying to use my mind to will my parents not to stop me from reading pulp novels. I might have moved on to the classics, so to speak, but I still loved a good cheap thrill every now and then.

"You think he got a treatise on fascism and the American Way from a paperback?" said my mother incredulously. "He hasn't been reading *Mein Kampf fur der Kinder*." My mother spoke German. This was so interesting that I nearly forgot my predicament, and spent a few moments listening with half an ear while I turned my mother over in my mind.

My mother wasn't German, nor were her parents, and she'd never been to Germany while I was around. In fact, I didn't think she'd been anywhere other than to the dentist and to visit my aunt in my entire life, at least since I could remember. So her knowledge of German had to come from some source of which I was unaware. I wondered if she'd teach me; I was working on Raul and Mr. Ximenez to teach me Spanish, and while I didn't know it at the time, they could have taught me French as well. In fact, Mrs. Ximenez spoke fluent French but also the various pidgins of it from the Caribbean, as well as Latin, Portuguese, and a smattering of words in half a dozen other languages, having lived in a port town most of her life.

"It wasn't as bad as that, was it?" asked my father. "I mean, it didn't seem like it. It sort of sounded like something a kid would say about the rules at school."

"He wasn't talking about school rules, he was talking about our government," said my mother. "I don't know where he got the ideas, but they were definitely more than just a kid complaining about lack of freedom. His principal said everyone had thought he'd just copied from some book until they read it a few times."

I decided I'd had enough. I would find out in the morning what the decision was, so I went back to my room to read Chapter Twelve of my book on insects. Mr. Ximenez had been right; the pictures were the best part.

I wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but I did know that I wasn't in school. I hadn't been for two days now, and I wondered how long this streak would continue. Days at home were

dull, days at school were dull; I often wished I could run away and join the circus, except I figured the circus wouldn't let me read books, so that was out.

I did spend a certain amount of time alone with my sister, which was strange since usually during the day she was with my mother. My grandmother was there, unless she went out on mission work, but both my mother and father were conspicuously absent. So I looked after Davy as best I could, and she looked after me, and together we tried not to burn the house down.

This was not an unrealistic goal, but it was also not unrealistic to believe that we might burn, if not the house, at least something down. There had been an incident several years earlier where I was in an unfortunate collision with a table carrying a large number of candles, some of which, to my chagrin, were lit at the time. Actually, all of them were, but some of them did go out when I hit them, which, while not much, is certainly something. I still had a little spot of scar tissue on my left leg from that accident, and after that I was very careful never to run near open flames, or closed ones for that matter.

Davy, on the other hand, was a very good baby, both in the sense of being good at being a baby and of acting properly. I'd grown up somewhat since the candles, so it was a fair bet that, between both of us, we could manage as little mayhem as possible. Actually, that was very little, because I spent most of the time either reading to myself, reading to Davy, or watching her draw diagrams and try to explain them to me, which of course she couldn't. We both knew that the problem was entirely on my end, but that didn't make it any less frustrating.

Davy enjoyed have books read to her, and since I thought that most baby books were pointless, I usually read from a good story book of my own. We finished *Peter Pan* in short order, and she seemed to enjoy it, so after that I never went back to picture books. At the moment we were deep in the midsection of *Myths of the Norsemen*, which I did recognize had many rather inappropriate parts, so I usually skipped those. I didn't know much about propriety, but it seemed to me that hearing certain things might not be good for a baby.

My grandmother stalked in from outside. "Trouble brewing," she said simply.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked, it being the polite thing to do. Actually, I didn't do it because it was the polite thing to do, but I knew she would tell me anyway no matter what I said, so I was simply hastening the inevitable.

"Big fire down on Marshall Avenue," said my grandmother, as if a large fire could be described as "brewing" rather than "happening." I didn't say anything about that though.

"What's burning?"

"You name it, it's on Marshall, it's burning," said my grandmother simply.

I couldn't name many things on Marshall Avenue, but one of the things I could name was Stacy. Or at least, I could say that her house was on Marshall, and while she might not currently be, and I certainly hoped she wasn't, I could say that it was possible that she, along with her house, was burning. I thought about this for a moment, unable to fully grasp it.

Marshall Avenue was the street where Stacy lived, along with her parents and dog Ginger. Also on that street were a lot of other things, most of which, if not all of which, were burning, at least according to my grandmother. There was Mr. Walsh's Delicatessen, which had good sodas. Used to have, I supposed. There were the factories, several of them, that kids sometimes liked to sneak into late at night and would usually get caught by the night watchman, although once a kid started up one of the presses and accidentally pressed his right arm off. They were undoubtedly burning. There were the offices. I never knew who worked there or what they did, and it looked like it might be that way permanently. There was that odd run-down store which looked like it sold used furniture, or possibly firewood. Well, I supposed that was irrelevant now; furniture or

firewood, it was burning.

And Stacy. She lived on Marshall. Which meant that her house was on fire. Stacy, with whom I was infatuated. I wondered suddenly whether she had started the fire. It didn't seem too far out of line to consider, but upon further though, the factories seemed a much likelier candidate. And why would Stacy want to burn down her home anyway?

It finally hit me. "Was anyone hurt?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Not sure," said my grandmother, who was already reading her latest newsletter from Brother Leon. "It was tough to tell. Looked like there was an ambulance there though, so maybe." She looked up from her reading. "Someone in particular you're worrying about boy?" she asked, not unkindly.

I stayed silent for a moment. "No, just wondering," I finally said.

When I finally returned to school, things had changed. I had to spend an hour a day in a little office with a new teacher I'd never seen before, Mr. Seldore, who would ask me funny questions and give me little tests to see how smart I was. I was only a child at the time, but I certainly hadn't been born yesterday, so I knew a child therapist when I saw one. Well, actually, I'd never seen one before and I didn't know what one was, but I had Mr. Seldore's number.

"Do you sometimes feel unhappy for no reason?" asked Mr. Seldore. He was always asking tedious questions like that.

"No," I answered, truthfully for once.

"Never?"

"Nope, I'm happy as a clam," I said, smiling with no real feeling behind it. I had learned that the best way to get adults to leave you alone was to simply smile and nod, metaphorically speaking.

"Do you ever feel like you're all alone?" He was really getting on my last nerve, but I stayed firm.

"No, not really," I lied. Let him think what he wanted. I was perfectly happy with myself, and if I sometimes wished I had friends, what difference did that make.

Mr. Seldore seemed to sense that his questions were not making an impression, so he gave me another one of his tests designed to blow my cover and show everyone that I was a genius. I wasn't a genius, but I was certain that's what these tests were supposed to do, so I treated them as such. Besides, the longer I took, the less time I had to spend chatting with Mr. Seldore about my home life and what books I read.

Stacy was mobbed by sympathetic souls in the lunch room. They all said how awful it was and how sorry they were and how brave she was and other nonsense like that. Being the consummate sneak that she was, she ate it all up and asked for more. Occasionally though her eyes would stray from the group to the window or the ceiling and get a very different look for a second or two. Then she would catch herself and go back to being brave and accepting sympathy.

I noticed all this because I spent a large amount of my lunch period looking in her direction without seeming to look in her direction. It wasn't every day you got to see a master at work. I wasn't interested in living her lifestyle, but it was fascinating to watch. Actually, if I'd known enough about her lifestyle, I would have seen that I was living it in spades, but I didn't so I could pretend and not even know I was pretending.

It also wasn't every day you got to see a kid whose house had burned down. She was

wearing clothes that obviously weren't hers, and she looked a little less rested and clean than usual. This wasn't part of the act, but to me it seemed as if it was, and I applauded her all the more, without actually applauding, of course.

"She looks really sad," said Mullins, seated next to me for a change. Because of the commotion, we had actually been joined by others of roughly our social rank who'd been forced out of their territories. Raul was there, although he'd taken to eating with me fairly regularly, and so was Leek, who didn't have a lunch. She never did, apparently, which worried the teachers and they asked her about it frequently, offering to buy her lunch or to talk her parents into giving her one. What they didn't understand was that Leek's parents had nothing to do with Leek's lack of lunch; she didn't eat it because she didn't want to, and like all other things about Leek, if she didn't want to, she didn't. I sometimes wondered whether she would be able to simply stand up in the middle of class and walk out and no one would do anything about it. She never did, so I never found out.

"My father helped them dig to find their things," said Raul proudly. I could imagine Mr. Ximenez doing that; it seemed like the sort of thing he would do. My mother had sent some clothes and blankets once she found out, and she didn't even know Stacy's family.

"She's sad on the inside too," said Leek in her quiet little voice. How she came to this canny insight I didn't know. I had come to the same conclusion after watching her and seeing those brief moments when her eyes changed. She wasn't sad like people whose houses burn down are sad. She was sad in a different way, and I didn't know what she was sad about.

"I saw the fire," said Mullins. "I thought it was going to keep burning forever and the whole town would burn down."

"It was big, I could see it from my house," Raul said.

I didn't say anything because I hadn't seen the fire and didn't really care how big it was. Leek didn't say anything either, but that was because she was practicing flipping a coin over her fingers like a magician. As I watched, the coin rolled around and around and suddenly vanished. I realized Leek was looking at me and giggling, and I sheepishly turned away and went back to looking at Stacy, who was sad because her books had burned.

"So how is Mr. Seldore?" asked my mother. It figured that she would know about him. I wondered who else knew.

"Fine," I said, hoping not to have to talk about it.

"How are you two getting along?" My mother was holding Davy and somehow also managing to stir pudding.

I didn't really want to answer, nor did I want to tell the truth if I did, but I also knew that my mother might be smart enough to know I was lying, and she definitely would interpret my silence.

"He's trying to get me to talk and I'm playing dumb," I said finally, throwing caution to the winds.

"Oh," said my mother simply. "Well, that's to be expected I suppose." She sighed. "You do know why you're seeing him, don't you?"

"Because you all want to move me to another class?" I asked. I was still playing dumb a little, but so little that I hoped to pass under the radar screen while my mother was concentrating on something else.

"If we wanted to move you to another class, we'd move you," said my mother matter-of-factly. "And who's this 'We' stuff anyway? I don't really have anything to do with it."

"So the school wants to see if I'm playing dumb so they can move me," I said, expecting this to be the dismal future.

"No, it's because we're all worried that you aren't... well, that you're not normal," said my mother, slowly, as if she was trying to make the words fit and just couldn't.

That I wasn't normal? Well, if they were worried about that, they could stop worrying, because they were right. I was most definitely not normal. "What do they want to do with me if I'm not normal?" I asked, because since I wasn't, I wanted to know whether to maintain the charade or drop it in favor of the results.

"I don't know," said my mother after a long pause. "Maybe send you to a special school. Maybe just try to make you more normal. I guess it depends on how much they buy your playing dumb routine."

My mother didn't seem at all affected by my admission about playing dumb. Perhaps it was because she too played dumb often enough. Secretly, I thought pretty much everyone who was smart enough to know better played a little dumb, because we're all a little selfish at heart and we don't want to have to give it all away.

Lynne was definitely not playing dumb. She was playing smart, which many people don't see through, but she was actually much too dumb to even think about playing dumb. Tip wasn't playing dumb because he genuinely didn't seem to care whether he was dumb or not. I wasn't quite sure about Mullins; the funny thing about him was that he was very dumb, but usually right. So maybe he wasn't playing anything at all, and he was actually the most honest person on the planet. I didn't like to think that, because I didn't like Mullins, but I supposed I could grant him honesty if it kept him stupid and fat.

Many people confuse stupid with dumb. Playing smart means you are either stupid or dumb, or possibly both. Playing dumb means you are smart, but you may also be stupid. Stupid is just a lack of information. Dumb is a general state of mind. It's also a condition of not being able to speak, but that's beside the point. Although I suppose that, by playing dumb, I was in effect also playing the other kind of dumb. So Mullins may have been stupid, but he wasn't necessarily dumb, even though he often seemed to be.

Stacy was playing everything. That made her very smart, or at least very clever. Jolly was playing everything too, but not well, which made him dumb and stupid. Davy was playing dumb, but not the kind that is the opposite of smart. She didn't bother to hide her intelligence because she knew none of us could understand it. In effect, she was playing foreign, or possibly was; either way, it didn't matter.

Raul wasn't playing dumb, nor was he playing smart. He cared, but he didn't play. Mr. Ximenez was just clever. He might also have been smart, but he didn't show off, which probably meant that he was smart. He definitely wasn't playing dumb, or stupid, or anything really, but in a completely different way from being honest. He wasn't lying, but he wasn't telling the truth either. I'd never met Mrs. Ximenez, but she was certainly not playing smart or showing off, which probably meant that she and her husband were perfect for each other, and also explained why they had produced Raul.

The rest of my class were mostly dumb. They didn't have to play it; they just were. They were also stupid, but I didn't hold that against most people who were dumb, since the dumbness usually was much worse. Leek was playing at being a student, which meant that she was clever, especially since she could get her way so often. It also might have made her smart, but I'm not sure she would have cared. She wasn't interested in smart, and thus she couldn't be classified.

My father wasn't stupid, but he was a bit dumb, although not terribly, and he compensated for this by being good at what he was, so it almost didn't matter. My aunt was dumb, but nice. Her husband was dumb, probably stupid, and definitely not nice, although a little clever. My cousin was dumb, stupid, and ugly, although that didn't really enter into it; I just called her that anyway because I felt like it. My grandmother wasn't dumb, she didn't play dumb or smart, she wasn't all that clever, but she had faith, which compensated for missing plusses and minuses. She was also probably not normal, nor was Davy. I was on the fence about a lot of other people in the normal issue.

"So you think I should keep playing dumb, or should I actually talk to this guy?" I asked, since she obviously didn't mind.

"Well boy, I don't think you're the type of abnormal that's going to kill people or blow things up, which is probably all they're really worried about, so you might try talking to him. Or you could keep playing dumb; they might see right through it."

"I want to stay where I am," I said defiantly. "I don't want to move ahead."

"I'm not asking you to," my mother replied. "I don't really understand why a kid as bright as you are doesn't want to move ahead so you won't be bored, but it's not really my decision no matter what."

"I'm not talking to him," I said. I wasn't sure why I said it, because it probably wasn't something I should do, but since my mother knew I was playing dumb and she knew just how dumb I was playing, it didn't seem to matter.

"Suit yourself," she said flippantly, as if it didn't matter at all to her, although I could tell that it did. "Oh, and I'm going to have to keep an eye on what you're reading. I just want to make sure you're not getting the wrong ideas."

I knew what the whole thing was about. It was about my essay, and that was the point everyone was dodging around. I decided to just stand back and let them dodge, and if it meant they never told me the full truth, then what reason did I have to tell them.

"Marie, she wanted me to give these to your mother," said Mr. Ximenez, handing me a parcel. "Now, you will only open it when you get home, maybe?"

"Is it a surprise?" I asked. I wasn't sure how I felt on the subject of surprises, but if it was from Mr. Ximenez, it couldn't be the bad kind of surprise. At least, I hoped not.

"It's just a little something, you know, not a big thing, but a friendship gift," said Mr. Ximenez, smiling kindly at the expression on my face. "Also, just a little something for you, to make you feel better maybe."

Mr. Ximenez wanted me to feel better? I wondered if he thought I was sick, but then decided he must be talking about my recent change in scholastic pursuits. "Okay, it'll be a surprise," I said solemnly as I put the mystery gift under my arm and set off for home.

Mr. Ximenez called after me, "Marie said very much that she would like your family here for dinner, soon maybe." It took a moment to work out the syntax, but when I did I turned and tried to think of something to say.

My family, over at the Ximenez house, for dinner. Where we would all meet Mrs. Ximenez. And the Ximenezes would meet my grandmother. It was at once both terrifying and incredibly exciting. "I'll tell my mother," I said finally, "and she'll figure it out." Good work, passing the buck to my mother. I gave myself a mental pat on the back as I turned homeward once more.

Lester was insanely jealous. "You're going to get to eat with Mrs. Ximenez?" he asked again, even though I'd told him at least twelve times.

"Yes, I am," I said again. "I promise I'll tell you all about it when I get back." This would have been magnanimous of me had I wanted something from Lester, but as it was, I didn't really care. I wanted to see Mrs. Ximenez, but for totally different reasons than Lester, and I didn't really care whether or not he got to be the one who told everyone.

I wanted to see Mrs. Ximenez because I wanted to hear a story, or maybe even just get to talk to her. And the more I thought about it, the less I minded bringing my grandmother. I was sure she would behave herself; she hadn't been very unusual lately and perhaps it would continue.

"Tell me everything, what their house looks like, what you eat, what they sound like, everything," said Lester. I didn't tell him that I could have told him what their house looked like and what they sounded like right now. He wouldn't have appreciated it as much.

"So, how's school been going?"

"Fine, fine."

"And you're not feeling sad or lonely or anything?"

"Nope, not at all."

"But Mrs. Lee tells me she never sees you talking to anyone. Don't you have any friends?"

"Sure, I've got friends."

"Who are they?"

"Well, Raul is my best friend. We spend a lot of time together."

"How do you feel about him? Do you like him?"

"Yes, I like him."

"What else?"

"He's funny sometimes, and he and his father said they might teach me to speak some Spanish one day."

"His father? So do you spend a lot of time with his father?"

"Not a lot, but sometimes he walks us home from school or he says hello to me in the hall. He's just nice."

"So you only have one friend?"

"No, Mullins is my friend."

"Who's Mullins? Is that someone from outside the school?"

"No, that's what we call Henry in my class."

"Why do you call him Mullins? Is it just you, or did someone else start it? How does Henry feel about it?"

"Everyone calls him Mullins, even kids in other classes. I don't know who started it. He doesn't seem to mind."

"How do you feel about him?"

"He's nice. He's not my best friend, but we spend lunch together a lot."

"What do you talk about with your friends? Do you talk about schoolwork?"

"Raul and I do, because we study together."

"So do you copy off each other's papers?"

"No, that's cheating."

"So what do you do?"

"We help each other understand things, and sometimes we do a really tough problem together."

"Do you talk about other things? Do you talk about politics?"

"What's politics?"

"You know, like the government, or dictators, or freedom, you know, politics."

"Oh. No, that stuff is boring."

"So you don't want to overthrow the government?"

It was Friday, and that meant that I didn't have to go back to school for two days. It's not a very original thing to say, but it's true. Most people don't realize just how true it is, but most people are just too dumb to know better. They think they don't like smart stuff, or math, or reading, but what they really don't like is school, and that's why they think to themselves in their heads, "It's Friday, and I don't have to go back to school for two days."

For me, it hadn't started to mean that much until I had to deal with both school and therapy at the same time. Plus the Lynne situation was getting out of hand. I was starting to actively avoid her company, although I would go somewhere else and just gaze upon her from afar. I didn't like the sound of her voice, or anything she said, and really, I wasn't sure if I liked her. I loved her, true, but the two aren't a package.

For instance, I liked the Ximenezes, but despite all the things Mr. Seldore might think, I didn't love any of them. I loved my grandmother, but there were certainly times when I didn't like her very much, although recently that was becoming less and less frequent.

So, I was happy to be free from school for two days, and this happiness was certainly apparent as I walked down the street in the direction of my house. I stopped briefly at Federman's Odd Shop and didn't even mind when Old Man Federman came out and chased me away. I bought a piece of candy at the Drug Store and actually enjoyed it. The walk home was surprisingly pleasant.

Inside of course, I knew that something bad was going to happen soon enough to spoil my mood, but I tried not to let that bother me and just enjoyed the mood while it lasted. I even kicked a stone or two into the creek, which was a little out of my way but worth the walk.

When I'd kicked a few stones, I decided that I really just wanted to sit by the creek and not go home right then. So I did; it wasn't in my nature to be capricious or random, but occasionally it strikes you and you have to listen.

While I was sitting there I saw Stacy walking by and remembered that I was just up from Marshall Avenue. This knowledge didn't concern my overly, but it just popped to mind.

Stacy stopped to stare at the creek too, which meant that we were within fifteen feet of each other. My stomach went all strange and I began to sweat a little, although it was rather cool out. I concentrated all my attention on the creek and tried very hard to pretend that she wasn't there.

"Your name is Jeffrey, right?"

She'd spoken to me. My neurons held an emergency meeting, but unfortunately they failed to inform my mouth, which went right ahead without any guidance.

"No," I said. What was I thinking? My name was Jeffrey, at least as far as she was concerned. "I mean, it is, but not really." Brilliant.

"What's that supposed to mean," she said, turning to look at me with a look in her eyes which I mistook for impending doom but which was in fact just curiosity.

Okay, so my brain couldn't be counted on to be quick enough and my mouth was

apparently a moron. I wondered if I could use my legs to communicate. "Well, everyone calls me Jeffrey, but that's not really my name." Okay, that sounded a little more coherent but it still left the gaping hole of what my name actually was. I couldn't tell her that. I mustn't tell her.

"Oh, so like Mullins?" she asked. Great. She was grouping me in with Mullins. I was doomed.

"No, it's not like that," I extemporized. So what was it like? "That's just his nickname. My legal name is Jeffrey, but my real name isn't." Isn't? What is it? I could feel the question slowly gaining on me.

"Oh," she said. "Well, okay then. But you are Jeffrey?"

This was better. My brain didn't need to answer this one. "Yeah," I said. Okay, I was, and if she would forget the previous five minutes, I would continue to be.

"Oh," she said again. "Lynne once told a story about you. She said you were a big liar."

Okay, how to run damage control on this one? Was lying bad? She probably didn't like Lynne, so would contradicting Lynne work? "What did she say?"

"She said you told her this story about your grandmother and this crazy church, but it was completely a lie," Stacy responded. "I didn't get to hear the whole thing because Lynne tripped and fell in a mud puddle." Stacy grinned at this, not to me, just to the air. Her smile was enchanting.

"Well, I wasn't lying," I said. "My grandmother really did take me to that church."

"Does she go to that church outside town?" she asked cannily.

"Yes, have you been there?" Not a good question to ask. Really not good. She wouldn't admit it if she had.

"Yeah, once," said Stacy nonchalantly. "My dad's cousin's really religious, and he took us along."

"Oh." It was my turn to say it. But now I had to continue, otherwise she might think I was judging her. "So what did you think?"

"Seemed kind of neat, you know, in a bizarre way," she said matter-of-factly. "I don't know that I believe in it, but it was neat to see."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Well, then I guess Lynne deserved to fall in that mud puddle," Stacy giggled.

I couldn't help myself. I was a moth drawn to the flame. I would be lucky to survive. "Did you trip her?"

Stacy looked at me a moment, as if measuring me up. "Yeah," she finally said. Then she turned around and started walking down the street away from me. "Bye, mysterious stranger," I heard her say before she rounded the corner and was gone.

"It strikes me as kind of funny that a man like that would have so many things wrong with his personal life," said my father, then he took another bite of chicken. Chicken was my father's favorite, so he was always in a good mood during chicken night. And it usually only was chicken night rather than chicken month, because my mother never cooked more than one chicken. I think she felt that it was too dangerous to let chicken sit, because if chicken went strange, it went strange in a bad way.

"Well, he's only human," said my mother.

"They should have run him out of town on a rail," said my grandmother firmly. "He was just asking for trouble, and now look at him."

"I don't want to look at him," said my father. "He's gone and that's fine."

"Just because he had one or two foibles doesn't make him a bad person," said my mother, equivocating.

"A few foibles?" sputtered my father.

"Yes it does," said my grandmother. She wasn't eating very much, I noticed. The strain of cutting and mashing chicken must have been too much for her.

I liked chicken too, but it didn't like me. Every time I ate chicken I would, several hours later, return it to the world outside my stomach in a violent way, either the way it came, or other ways too noxious to think about. So I didn't eat chicken. I ate stew, which didn't have chicken in it, nor anything else worth eating, at least in my opinion at the time, so I didn't eat much stew and I ate it very slowly.

"The man ran off with his sister's best friend!" said my father in shock. "And you say 'a few foibles!'"

"Dear, not in front of the kids," hushed my mother.

"His poor wife, now she's a sainted soul," said my grandmother pensively.

"You remember our talk about appropriate dinner conversation?" said my mother suggestively, as if she was trying to say something without saying it. My father caught himself and coughed.

"Oh, yes, right," he said finally after he gathered his breath. "Boy, you just forget I said that."

"Yes, why don't we talk about something else," hinted my mother in my grandmother's direction. My father chimed in likewise.

"Why should we?" asked my grandmother petulantly. "The boy's old enough to figure things out for himself."

"It's okay," I said. "I don't want to hear about it anyway."

My father looked a little shocked. My grandmother harrumphed and returned to her meal. My mother gave me a penetrating glance.

Davy was having a ball since no one was watching her. She'd stopped pushing strained beets onto my plate and was now making little mounds out of them and burbling softly to herself.

"Why don't we talk about fascism and the American Way?" I asked innocently. Inwardly I was preparing for the onslaught, but since I knew it was coming and I intended for it to come, I was fairly sure of weathering it.

My room was small, but not any smaller than anyone else's room in the house. I guess the house was just small, which made everyone's rooms small. I had a bookshelf which had my books on it, a table with a lamp, as well as a secret flashlight no one was supposed to know about which I used to read after I was supposed to be in bed, although only if I really had to finish the chapter. There were a few games and puzzles on other shelves which I liked to take down and play with when I had nothing better to do.

I had nothing better to do right then, or rather I did, but I couldn't do it, so it was for all intents and purposes the same thing. I was putting together a jigsaw puzzle, one with a thousand pieces I'd gotten for my birthday last year. It had a picture on it of a work of art which I didn't recognize because it was really just some random painting of flowers. I'd been working on it, off and on, for the past few weeks; the flowers all looked the same, which made the whole thing rather difficult.

I was in my room unable to do anything better because of dinner conversation, and I had to stay there until my mother and father thought up what to say or do about me. I was used to it;

they often had to think about what to say or do about me. It wasn't even a punishment; they just needed some time to prepare.

It had taken a rather long time this time, which I understood, given the fact that I'd called their bluff and upped the bet at the same time. What was one supposed to say to someone like me? I did hope it wouldn't affect our plans to have dinner with the Ximenezes.

My grandmother was in her room too, and I could hear her tossing and turning in her bed. It was an early evening for her, but she'd been going to bed earlier recently, so I assumed it must be the change of season or something similar. I couldn't hear Davy, but I knew she would be in her crib in my parent's room as well. I wondered for a moment where she was going to sleep when she needed her own room.

I was fed up. Really, I was just tired, but it manifested itself in being fed up. I didn't want to speak to brainless therapists, I didn't want all my teachers watching me, and I didn't want everyone going around thinking I was going to be the next John Wilkes Booth. I knew what it was all about, but they could stop worrying.

Getting them to stop worrying, however, was rather difficult without also blowing my cover and letting them all see what was really going on. I knew some people already knew, like my mother and Mr. Ximenez, and many people suspected, so I could approach them, but the people who really mattered, the school administration, were unaware and as such had to be told indirectly. Which is what I was endeavoring to do, hard though it might be.

Certainly I might have read a few books that were too old for me, not in terms of my skill level but in terms of emotional maturity. I could accept this. If they would leave me alone, I would stick to books that were enjoyable but not proscribed. I was willing to make that sacrifice. Unfortunately, they had lumped any book beyond Dick and Jane into the category of "Not Appropriate For You" and thus, giving in on part of the restriction would not do. I would be forced to live out my bleak existence as a drone until I got old enough to read the books I wanted to read. By that point I might be completely devoid of brains, having been beaten down and zombie-fied by school and the times tables. So capitulation was out.

On the opposite side of the coin, I couldn't let them know I wasn't as dumb as the rest of my classmates or even most of the rest of the world. If they found that out, I'd never get any peace.

I found the last piece of a particularly troubling flower and put it into place. This improved my morale slightly, but only slightly.

"I don't understand. Why should four times zero be the same as five times zero? That's like saying four and five are the same number."

"No, it's like adding zero to itself. That leaves zero, right?"

"But that's only adding. Zero multiplied must be more."

"No, zero times two is just zero plus zero, so zero times three is zero plus zero plus zero."

"But at some point, it's got to get bigger."

"Raul, trust me, it doesn't."

"How do you know?"

"Um..."

"Well, you don't, do you?"

"No, but someone does and I take their word for it, just like you have to take..."

"But why? Why should you take their word? I don't take Mullins' word about whether or not he stole my cookie, so why should I take some person I don't even know's word for zero

not getting bigger?"

"That's how math works."

"Math is stupid then."

"No, it's just a matter of faith."

"So you're saying that math is like God?"

"A little."

"What if you don't believe in math?"

"Well then Mrs. Lee gives you a zero on your paper. And all those zeros only add up to zero, so then, at the end of the year when she adds all the grades up, yours will be zero."

"Oh."

"So what's one hundred times zero?"

"Um... one hundred?"

"I'm so glad you could make it, and Marie, she is very glad too," said Mr. Ximenez as he opened his door with a big smile on his face.

"We brought over some wine for us all to share," said my mother, smiling back.

Mr. Ximenez then did something that I'd never seen him do before, but which somehow seemed perfectly natural. He embraced my mother warmly and then kissed her lightly on both cheeks. What was more, he did the same to my father and my grandmother. Davy and I didn't participate, which I guess was because we weren't grown-ups.

"Come in, come in, dinner will be in a few minutes maybe," said Mr. Ximenez as he ushered the adults in. "And Jeffrey, I'm so glad to see you liked your little surprise." He grinned at me and winked and then gestured me inside as well.

I was wearing my "little surprise" as he called it. It was a tight-knitted woolen hat in many different bright colors. I'd never seen one like it before and, since the weather had become much more chilly, I wore it often. Raul had told me his mother had made it to look like hats from the islands. I didn't know what islands he meant, but I supposed they must be some Spanish islands I didn't know about.

Raul was in the living room when I entered, looking very neat and tidy, which was a definite change. He seemed a little nervous and shy, which I could understand completely. I probably seemed the same way.

"Please, have seats," said Mr. Ximenez as he found chairs for everyone. The house was small but cheery, decorated in a fascinating way, all bright colors and fabrics and wood. The chairs were wood too, a light-colored wood which had been polished until it shone. There was a shelf to one side of the room, which I noticed had a large number of books on it.

"You have such a beautiful house," said my mother, sitting.

"Yes, so wonderful to look at," said my father. I think my mother was being genuine and my father was being polite, but if he was, he was doing a good job of it.

"That cross is just lovely," said my grandmother. When she said it, I finally noticed, on the wall in front of us, the wooden cross with a rough figure of Jesus on it. Somehow, not being able to see the detail made the whole thing look more personal, like you could see Jesus' real face, not the face some artist wanted him to have. I liked the effect.

"Oh thank you, you are too kind," said Mr. Ximenez. "The cross we brought from Puerto Rico, it was a present from her father."

"So you all are Christians?" asked my grandmother. I stiffened, hoping she would drop the subject.

"Yes, Catholic," Mr. Ximenez said, not seeming to mind the question.

"The food smells wonderful," said my mother hastily, trying to change the subject. "What is your wife cooking?"

"Marie, she is cooking some dishes she learned to prepare in school," said Mr. Ximenez. "She told me they would be ready in moments."

There was a silence after that as everyone settled themselves a little, got used to the situation. Raul and I were sitting on the floor across from one another; we kept making eye contact and giggling.

"I wanted to thank you again for your son, he has been so helpful to little Raul," said Mr. Ximenez.

"Oh, I hope he has been," said my father. "It's good for him to share with other people, and he's made friends too."

"Yes, yes, and not just my Raul," said Mr. Ximenez, smiling down at us both. "He has made us all friends."

"Oh yes, I must introduce you," said my mother. She introduced my father, who shook hands with Mr. Ximenez, and then my grandmother.

When my grandmother was introduced she smiled. "Always good to meet good people," she said. I think the sigh of relief from the rest of my family must have been palpable. "I wish we had one of those crosses to put up in our home."

"Oh, how I wish I could give to you one," said Mr. Ximenez, smiling at my grandmother. "Maybe, if we ever make it back to Puerto Rico, we shall have to get another one for you maybe." With anyone else I would have thought he didn't mean it, but with Mr. Ximenez I honestly believed that, had he been able to leave right then, he would have gone to Puerto Rico immediately to get one.

"Oh no no, that's nice, but I just meant a nice big pretty one like that, not one all the way from other parts," said my grandmother. What was interesting was that, while Mr. Ximenez seemed to mean what he was saying, my grandmother seemed to mean what she was saying as well, which was not a common occurrence.

"And this is little Mary-David," said my mother, holding up Davy.

"Her name, it is like my Marie's," said Mr. Ximenez, smiling. "She is a beautiful child, also like my Marie." He laughed and my mother laughed too. It must have been a joke I didn't get.

Just then, Mrs. Ximenez entered the room. I couldn't help staring. She was not like I imagined she would be, not the small waif-like Spanish princess of my imaginings. Mrs. Ximenez was tall and regal, with strong face and a strong presence, although not one of domination. Her skin was darker than coal, seeming to have an almost blue sheen, and her hair was dark too, but cut very short to her head so she looked like she was wearing a hat rather than hair. But what stopped me from looking at anything else was her face. It was not a beautiful face in any way one could define; it wasn't dainty or sweet or even classical. It was the beauty of someone who has lived a hard life but is still happy.

As I stared at her face, I noticed something, and I turned around to look at everyone else. Her face had the same quality as Mr. Ximenez, the same kindness even though the face was worn. But I could also see a little of it in my father and mother, who were standing to introduce themselves.

Mrs. Ximenez said something in a foreign language to Mr. Ximenez, and her turned to everyone and smiled apologetically. "Marie, she says she is sorry not being able to talk well to

you, but her English is not as good as mine."

"Thank you for coming," said Mrs. Ximenez in a beautiful lyrical tone. Her accent was totally different from her husband's, a cultured accent which sounded more like singing than talking.

"Thank you for having us," said my mother. She didn't speak as if to a child, which made me happy, because I knew many people who would speak that way to someone who didn't understand them. But my mother simply said it, perhaps a little slower than usual, but with no trace of condescension or arrogance.

"Now, please, dinner will be ready and you are hungry," said Mr. Ximenez, beckoning us toward the dining room.

"Jeffrey, why don't you do the next one?" Mrs. Lee seemed to be picking on me today; she had made me read two paragraphs and do three problems so far, and it wasn't even lunch. I slowly got up from my seat. As I walked up the aisle, I wondered to myself whether or not I was fooling anyone.

I did the problem rather more quickly than usual, simply because I just wanted to get it over with. I was on my way back to my seat when Mrs. Lee stopped me. "Can anyone see what Jeffrey is missing?" she asked the class.

I was befuddled. What was I missing? I never got math problems wrong.

Leek stuck up her hand. "Yes Branwen?" said Mrs. Lee.

Then Branwen told everyone what I was missing. I felt like I'd been shot.

"What was the house like?" asked Lester.

"It was small, but it looked nice," I said. I wasn't really thinking about Lester's questions. I was thinking about missing a math problem. Had I lost my brain already? Was trying to be dumb making me become dumb?

"What did you eat?"

"French food," I said. That had been a bit of a shock, but then I'd learned that Mrs. Ximenez was French, or at least partially, and she'd learned classical French cooking at school, which is also where she'd learned to move silently, though I didn't know that part.

"French food?" said Lester with a look on his face that said he thought I was lying. "I thought Raul was Spanish."

"He is," I said. It wasn't a lie, because he was, partially at least. His family came from Puerto Rico, which was Hispanic, and his father was certainly Hispanic, although he'd grown up in Idaho, and his mother was French, partially, so that meant it was too complicated to figure out and so he was Spanish.

"Well then why didn't you have Spanish food?" asked Lester, which was a good question from his point of view but at the same time made me angry at him.

"Because Mrs. Ximenez doesn't cook Spanish food," I said sharply.

"What was she like?" Lester continued.

"She was tall, as tall as Mr. Ximenez, and she had really short hair. And she was black."

"Jer, that's it, you're lying again," Lester said. "If she was black, Raul would be black too. And why wouldn't she come out then, if she was black?" He hopped down from the hood of the car. "Why don't you just give it up," he said over his shoulder as he walked back to his house. "Or at least make up some better stories."

I didn't follow him, or call after him, or even answer him. I just sat on the hood of the

car, watching the sky gradually get darker, and slowly picked at my nails until they were cut to the quick.

"Jeffrey," said my mother, and I knew it was trouble, because she never called me Jeffrey. "I need to talk to you."

I went, because there was no use trying to run from it. My mother could take down a cheetah if she had to talk to it.

"We've talked about how worried everyone is about you," said my mother. "And I think I've been pretty up-front about everything, but you haven't been."

"What haven't I told you?" I asked. Maybe if I could get her to tell me, it would be easier to weasel out of it.

"Well, I don't think you trust me, or anyone," said my mother. "I knew all about your books before you told me, and I've known that you were much brighter than you let on for a while now. I just don't understand why you won't just be who you are."

"I am who I am," I said, rather reasonably I thought.

"That's your choice to make," said my mother with a sigh. "But I just wanted you to know that your father and I don't think you're going to grow up to be a psychopath or anything like that. We just hate to see you trying so hard not to be yourself. But if you really want to stay where you are, and keep going with the way things are, we're not going to stop you. I'm not going to make you skip ahead a grade or go to another school, and we'll try not to let the school do that either."

"Okay," I said stupidly. There wasn't a whole lot I could say to that.

"And I'm not going to stop you from reading," said my mother, one step ahead of me as always. "Now, now that I've told you all that, can you take me at my word and just tell me the truth?"

Could I? I had been pretending for so long it didn't really seem like it was worth it. But then there was the whole "getting dumber" thing to consider. On closer inspection, the whole thing didn't really seem to matter.

"Okay," I said. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, why you wrote that paper. Was it what you really think?"

"It was just a paper," I said. "I wrote it so I could get to eat lunch with the President. I guess it was a mistake to even try to write an intelligent paper, since that sort of blew my cover."

"So you don't really think that freedom is worthless and that the United States is really a fascism?"

"Well..." I had to pause for a minute because I wasn't sure. I certainly didn't see much point in freedom, since it didn't seem to get me anywhere. But I guessed there were some plusses to it too, that I would probably come to see later in life or something. "I don't believe that. But I do believe a lot of what I said in the paper. I think people are just reading it wrong."

"Boy, at your age there shouldn't be any wrong way to read it," my mother said wryly. "You really wrote all that from your head?"

"Yes," I said. I was doomed. Much as I loved my mother, I was completely sure that she was going to take this knowledge and do horrible things with it.

"That's pretty amazing," said my mother, patting me on the head. "You're in Third Grade, and you're writing like that. If I had your brain, I would be trying to get as far up the ladder in school as I could, not sitting at the bottom where I didn't belong."

I didn't know what to say to this. I didn't want to lie, but at the same time, I didn't want

to tell the truth. My mother was right; if she had my brain, she would be in college at my age. But I didn't really care about that. All I wanted was as much free time as possible so I could do the things that really mattered. That was freedom; time to do things that really mattered. I suddenly wished I had written that paper instead of the one I did write. But, I rationalized, the President was probably terribly dumb.

We were having ice cream, and I didn't know why. I was sure it wasn't right to have ice cream on the first day of snow, but the Ice Cream Bar didn't seem to agree with me. They were open year-round, but in the winter they didn't sell much ice cream. Their inventory switched over to hot cocoa and mulled cider and coffee, plus various little warm things you could eat. I never knew where they got these things, given the fact that they were an ice cream shop, but I didn't mind. I liked to eat ice cream year-round, although not usually when it was snowing.

My grandmother was at home, sleeping. She had said that if we wanted to be fools in the snow, she wanted no part in it, and then added that her bones were aching from the cold and she thought she would go to bed. I didn't mind. That meant more ice cream for me, I reasoned, and although it really had very little to do with it, it made me feel a little better about her absence.

At the Ice Cream Bar were a large number of people, filling up the tables and crowding around the counter. I supposed that everyone had had the same idea as my family, although they seemed to be all getting warm things.

Stacy and her parents were there, and I wondered for a moment about her house. Where were they living now? Did they have to live in the snow? I reasoned that they couldn't be living in the snow because they would freeze, and that they must still be living near where they used to since Stacy still went home in the same direction. If I had had more moxie, I might have gone up and asked them, but as it was, I just looked and wondered.

When we finally made it up to the counter I could barely keep from diving over it and devouring the ice cream underneath. Then I noticed something. No ice cream. There was none, nor was there the Spoon. "Hey!" I called out to Marge. "Where's the ice cream?"

"You want ice cream at this time of year?" she laughed, and my parents laughed too. Davy even gave a little chuckle. "Sorry kid, the van with the ice cream got stuck two towns over, so we won't have any until it gets here." I was shocked. What could I do? I couldn't make it through life without a Double Trouble. Even though I'd expressed doubts on the subject of eating ice cream now, I had still been expecting it. "Why not have a scone or a piece of pie or something," said Marge, seeing my crestfallen face. "I've got lots of different pies, and I'll even put syrup on them if you want."

"No thanks," I said politely but sadly. Marge shook her head knowingly, then took my father's order. Meanwhile, I slunk away from the counter and plopped down into the first seat available. No ice cream. No Double Trouble. What was the world coming to?

"Hey, why you look so down in the mouth?" came a voice from next to me. A voice I recognized.

"What, your cat die or something?" asked Stacy.

"No, it's just that they're out of ice cream," I said glumly. I was so glum I didn't even remember to feel shocked that she was next to me or that she was talking to me. I didn't feel nervous at all, which was definitely an improvement over the alternative.

"You wanted ice cream?" she asked, a little nastily, but then, she was evil. "Why not pie or something?"

"I don't really like pie," I said bluntly.

"So you came here on the first snow day to get ice cream?" she said, shaking her head as if amused by the whole concept. "You are definitely one of a kind, stranger." She was calling me stranger, which was strange, since we'd been introduced before.

"What did you get?" I asked, in lieu of having to respond to being one of a kind.

"Chocolate brownie," she said, taking a bite.

"Any good?"

"It's not the best, but it's good enough." With this pithy remark she returned full force to her plate. We sat in silence. I was still really thinking of the ice cream I didn't have, so even this silence failed to make me embarrassed.

Then, suddenly, Stacy poked me. "Hey," she said under her breath. "You want to see something funny?" She held out her right hand, the one that had been under the table the whole time. In it was a melting but still quite large snowball.

"What are you doing?" I asked her in the same sotto voce.

"What do you think I'm doing?" she muttered sarcastically. "Who should I aim for?"

I was caught. I couldn't say not to throw it, because that wouldn't matter. Then she'd throw it anyway, except at someone at whom I might not want her to throw. I had a moral obligation to direct her fire to someone who deserved it. I scanned the room. "Throw it at the bald guy," I said finally, pointing.

The bald guy to whom I was pointing was deserving of a snowball strike if anyone else in the Bar was. I didn't know his name, but he lived a few blocks from my house. Sometimes he would walk past me sitting somewhere and say rude things to me. He would have to get hit so that others might remain without snow on their faces.

"Good one," said Stacy, giggling softly. "Watch. It's all in the wrist."

Before I could even say anything in response she had spun, lobbed the snowball, and was sitting eating her brownie like nothing had happened. I followed her example and tried to keep a low profile. I heard the wet splotch of snowball hitting bald head, and then a lot of commotion from that side of the Bar.

"He has no idea," whispered Stacy.

I was strangely exhilarated. I didn't feel right about it, but it certainly had been enjoyable. The commotion continued, as I'd known it would, since the bald guy was one to cause a commotion if there ever was one. The commotion didn't move in our direction, and I was impressed by the skill. Stacy, even if she hadn't been innocent and pure, would still have gotten away with it, simply because she knew what she was doing.

Did I know what I was doing? Probably not. I said goodbye and stood, then walked off to find my parents. Stacy just nodded and ate the last bite of her brownie.

My mother was in her robe at the bottom of the stairs. "Did you sleep well?" she asked as I stumbled down them. I was never completely awake in the mornings until I had a drink of something or a bite to eat. I suppose it must have been my blood sugar levels, but at the time I didn't think much of it other than to know that, when the time came to get up for school, I had to get up rather than sit in my bed and wait to wake up. If I did the latter, I usually fell back asleep within seconds.

I said something which could have been a yes, or perhaps a groan of suffering. My mother didn't seem to mind. "Juice is on the table," she said.

My father was at the table too. "Morning boy," he said from behind his magazine. My father read a different magazine every day, magazines he got from the break room at the mine

after no one else wanted them. Sometimes they were just really old news magazines, but other times they were about art museums and galleries, and once he even read a magazine about cooking and housekeeping. My mother had a laugh about that one, but he said it was actually very interesting, and after he finished it, she read it. Then the next week we had goulash, which was definitely not something we often had on the menu, so I suppose my mother must have gotten something out of the magazine.

Today my father was reading an arts and crafts magazine which looked to be mostly about cross-stitch. He was very cosmopolitan about the whole thing and he never failed to read the magazine cover to cover, no matter what the subject matter. I drank my juice and started to feel a little more human.

"Lots of snow last night," said my father.

"Really?" I asked. "Is school canceled?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe your mother does. Certainly seems likely; I can't go to work today and it doesn't seem like it's going to let up any time soon."

This was enough excitement to propel me from morning malaise into hyperspeed. I rushed back out to my mother, who was sitting on the couch drinking her cup of coffee and humming what I thought was a Christmas tune. "Is school closed?" I asked her breathlessly.

"Take a look outside," she said with a smile. I did just that, except I couldn't see outside because there was a huge bank of snow that had drifted over the window.

"Holy cow," I said in an awed voice.

"So I don't think there's going to be any school," my mother chuckled.

"Dad wasn't kidding about the snow," I said, still looking out at what I couldn't see. "Can I go out in it? Please?"

My mother thought for a moment. "Why don't you eat something first, just so you don't drop dead in the snow of starvation," she suggested. "The snow will still be there in an hour or two, and by then the sun will be all the way up so you'll be able to see better."

I allowed myself to be led back to the kitchen and fed more breakfast than I would have normally eaten in three days.

The snow was still there, and it was still coming down. The town was buried. Nothing was open, and very few people could even go outside without disappearing into the white. My father had eventually forged his way over to the Drug Store to see if he could get us any essentials, but he came back empty handed. "They're fresh out of everything," he said exhaustedly, sinking down onto the couch like he might never move again. "Dolores told me she was just going to close up after I left because she didn't have anything to sell."

"Oh dear," said my mother in a worried tone. "Well, we've got enough food to last us for a while, and at least we still have heat and power."

"This is like the blizzard of Thirty-Two," said my grandmother.

"What's the blizzard of Thirty-Two?" I asked her, interested.

"What have they been teaching you in these schools boy?" exclaimed my grandmother in shock. "You mean to tell me you don't know about the blizzard of Thirty-Two?"

"No," I was forced to reply.

"Well then, I'll do their jobs for them," said my grandmother, with obvious satisfaction. She didn't think much of schools and she took great pride in being able to point out their shortcomings. "Way back, a long time ago, when I was still a girl, this whole region got hit by an enormous blizzard. It lasted for six days, and it was so strong that no one could go outside,

not even my father, who was a big strong man. He once got lost in the woods and had to survive by killing rabbits with his buck knife."

"Really?" I asked, amazed. I'd never heard this about my great grandfather.

"Yeah, Granddad was a fighter," said my father. "He never had much schooling, but he was master of the wilderness." He chuckled, remembering something that he didn't share.

"Anyway, after it was done, the snow was eight feet deep," continued my grandmother dramatically. "That's tall as any man. So no one could get out and about, and we all just waited for the snow to melt."

"And did it melt?"

"The next two weeks, the sky was overcast so no sun got through, and the temperature was below freezing even during the day. It was the coldest winter on record that year. And the wind was blowing something fierce, and it would blow up huge mounds of snow over trees and houses. We tried to dig tunnels underneath the snow to move around, but the snow was just too light, and they always collapsed on us."

"What did you do?" I asked with genuine concern.

"Well, my father crawled up on top of the snow and used his snow shoes to walk to the next town over where there wasn't so much snow, and he brought us back some food and chopped down some wood for our fire, so we were all right. But after the snow melted, six or seven people had frozen to death trying to get out, and a few families had lost their youngest children from starvation."

"Wow!" was all I could think to say. This was a much better story than any I'd ever read in a book, simply because it was true and it happened to my family.

"And they say that there were some people who just went missing and were never found," said my grandmother mysteriously. "Some folk said those people had just gotten lost and died somewhere, and some said they had been eaten by bears, but the truth is..." My grandmother leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. "The truth is that those people got eaten, but not by bears."

"Who did they get eaten by?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"They got eaten by starving people," said my grandmother with a flourish.

"Mom, don't fill the boy's head with nonsense," said my mother in a voice which was half scolding, half laughter. "She's just kidding you. Those people probably got lost."

"Oh, you can believe that if you want," said my grandmother darkly. "But I know better. That's why you shouldn't go out in the snow when it's dark like this; you might get kidnapped by hungry people and eaten."

My mother and grandmother both began saying things at once, trying to reassure me and warn me simultaneously. I just sat on the floor with wide eyes. Cannibalism in my own home town. Okay, so actually it wasn't my home town, since my grandmother had lived in Bakersville all her life until she moved in with us, but Bakersville was close enough. I wasn't scared; I was just fascinated. What else didn't I know about the history of my town? Maybe there had been pirates and wizards too.

Lester was too easy a target. His parents made him wear the jacket his grandmother had bought him. It was bright pink and he hated it, but his parents told him he was to wear it, so he had to. Why his grandmother believed that bright pink was a good color for a boy Lester's age was another question entirely. She was a little befuddled at times and when Lester wasn't around to remind her otherwise, she believed him to be a girl. Thus, Lester had pink clothing. If we'd

been old enough to understand homosexuality, we probably would have made fun of him, but as it was, he just didn't want to wear girl's clothing.

Therefore Lester stood out against the snow like a fly in a glass of water, which made him too easy to see. Seeing wasn't necessarily hitting, but not being able to see someone certainly made it harder. I tried to wear white as much as possible, since stealth was key to combat of this kind.

By this kind I mean the sprawling, endlessly changing free-for-all that developed between every kid in town whenever there was snow. Since there was quite a lot of snow and it was showing no signs of melting, the free-for-all became so long as to be classified as a battle. Kids from one block would fight kids from another block, or sometimes just fight each other, with both sides absorbing players from surrounding areas without respect for geographical boundaries. The best way was to gather a group of people whom you trusted not to hit you in the back of the head when you weren't looking. Then you could form a fast-moving strike force that would sweep down on various unsuspecting kids and overwhelm them with firepower, then flee before reinforcements arrived.

If you couldn't get a large group, you had to make do with someone to watch your back. I knew I couldn't count on Lester, both because of the aforementioned pink coat, but also because I didn't trust him and he often gave up and went inside at awkward moments. So as early as I could, I plowed my way through the drifts and deep parts to Raul's house to enlist him. He was only too happy to oblige, but since we were few and not terribly powerful at that, we tried to steer clear of targets which looked like they might make us eat snow.

This left Lester and Mullins in our list of immediate targets, and we pummeled both of them because they hadn't had the foresight to get a wing man. After that got boring, we tried taking on a group of kids from Hunter Street, but were soundly rebuffed by a veritable hail of snowballs. Since then, we had been lying low, skulking around the town, avoiding groups and open areas, and trying to find someone who was worth hitting with a snowball.

"We could try in front of the school," suggested Raul.

"No, too many kids will be thinking the same thing," I responded with a knowledgeable air to my voice. "Last time there was a big snow I nearly got buried when I tried."

"Well, how about Marshall, we haven't been down Marshall?"

He made a good point, but something in the back of my mind raised a warning flag, and I stopped for a moment to see what the flag was. It was the Stacy flag; Stacy was on Marshall, which meant that approaching Marshall would likely get us killed, or at the very least covered in stinging red snowball marks. "Stacy lives on Marshall," I said.

"So what?" said Raul, and then I remembered that he, like most other people, didn't know that Stacy was a cold-hearted mischief-maker, and would undoubtedly have a large stash of snowballs saved up for anyone who ventured into her domain. I couldn't tell him, of course, although he was one person who might have believed me.

"Well, she said once that a lot of kids hang out on Marshall and have a big war on snow days," I said, rather impressed with my handling of the situation.

"Okay, well then let's go watch that!" Raul said, and my heart sank. He was obviously more intrigued by the concept of a snow war than he was frightened of the consequences.

So we walked to Marshall Avenue. I was apprehensive and kept in the shadows and behind cars, but Raul would look around every corner like he was expecting treasure. I could still see the results of the fire, although they didn't look so bad with snow covering them. Most of the buildings on two blocks were either gutted or destroyed, giving the whole area a very war

zone feel, and probably heightening the experience for Raul, although it made me even more anxious.

Then it happened. Someone, somewhere, hidden behind any of a myriad of obstacles, threw a snowball which smacked into the side of my head without warning. It certainly wasn't as bad as being hit by a baseball, but it was enough to knock me over into the snow. Raul was already crouching. "It came from across the street, maybe behind that drift between the two cars," he said softly. Maybe he didn't say it softly, but it certainly sounded soft, although this could have been because I had snow in my ears.

"See," I said, "it's like a war. They all hide and you can't even see where they are. It's pretty boring unless you like getting hit by snowballs, so maybe we should just go somewhere else."

"I think I can hit them from here," said Raul, making a snowball rapidly. Then he stood quickly and threw his snowball hard in that direction. Then he fell over with snow all over his face. "Ouch," he said in a muffled voice.

"I told you," I said, but my mind was on that throw. Stacy was good. Very good. He had only been topside for about three seconds, and he hadn't even seen it coming.

"Maybe we should reposition," he said, obviously thinking tactically. I was thinking strategically; specifically, I was thinking about what strategy to use to get us out of here. We both crawled along through the snow, not even showing above it.

Another snowball hit me in the back. How did she know where we were? "We've got to just get out of here, we're way out of our league," I pleaded to Raul.

"No, I think if we keep moving we can cut around whoever it is and catch them from behind. It can't be more than one kid."

"But she's too good for us."

"What makes you think it's a she?"

He had me again. "Oh, no reason, you know, sexual equality," I stammered. He had no idea what sexual equality was, but he didn't seem to care. Without saying a word, he vaulted over into the street and ran across. A snowball clipped his heel. But it looked like it had come from our side of the street. I was staying put.

I watched with growing apprehension as Raul snuck closer and closer to where he said the kid, who had to be Stacy, was. Then he reached it and stopped. Then stood.

"Hey, Jeff, there's nobody..." That was all he could get out before he caught another snowball in the face. This one was definitely coming from my side of the street.

Then I heard someone laugh. A familiar, nasty laugh. "Hey stranger, is this chump with you?" Stacy called down from where she had been sitting in the fire escape all along.

"And then we went sledding on that big hill by the church," I said as my mother continued to brush the snow off of my back.

"Well it sounds like you had a good time," she said. "Okay, you're clean, come on in the house."

"Back already?" laughed my father. He had a rather peculiar habit of sarcasm, although one couldn't really call it sarcasm because he didn't mean anything cynical by it. He just used it to make light of a situation. So when he said "You want a little more?" when I was taking a lot of food, he didn't intend it to be mean, he just was making light of my appetite.

"Well, we didn't have much to do," I said in reply. I was fast becoming clued in to my father's point of view, so when he made an understatement, I would make one right back.

"Oh, that's too bad," he said with a smile. "I remember back when I was a boy. Your aunt and I used to go out when the sun had just come up so we could be the first ones to walk in the snow in our neighborhood. But somehow, someone always beat us to it." He laughed. "I guess there was someone who went out and waited until it stopped snowing, then walked around, just to spoil everyone's fun."

"Why was it so important to be the first ones out in the snow?" I asked as I pulled my boots off.

"Come on boy, you mean you've never looked out at snow that's just fallen and wanted to run through it before anyone else could mess it up?" my father asked, as if this was the most natural feeling in the world.

"Well, I guess, but it's never been a big deal."

"Not a big deal!" exclaimed my father. "It's the only deal!" He realized he was shouting, although he wasn't mad, and he lowered his voice a little. "You have to understand," he continued, "new snow is like an empty page. No one has written on it, but soon, everyone will. So you have to get out there first and write your story before most of the page gets used up."

I could understand this metaphor. "So running around in the snow is telling a story?" I asked.

"Sure," he replied, "although you might not be able to read it. Everything we do leaves a mark on our world, just some marks are easier to see than others." He repositioned himself on the couch. "See, I work in a mine, so I get to see stories that are thousands of years old. It reminds me of when I was your age. I wanted to study dinosaur bones." He laughed. "Can you imagine, me, studying dinosaurs?"

"Yes," I said, truthfully. My father was old and tired from work, but I could see him wearing an explorer's outfit and telling the native diggers what to do. He looked rather good in a pith helmet.

My father laughed again, a bitter laugh that wasn't directed at me. "Well, the farther down you go, the older the earth gets," he said, conjuring up a mine shaft in my mind. "So the layers of coal that we're digging are left over from dead animals and plants from millions of years ago. Those stories are hard to make out; you just have a basic idea that something lived and died there. But farther up," and the elevator of his hands ascended the shaft, "the stories are more clear. You sometimes see bones, or maybe pottery or bricks, stuff which was left over from someone's life."

I couldn't decide which I wanted to hear more: Mrs. Ximenez's stories, or the Earth's. They both sounded wonderful, if different. Since I didn't speak either language, I reasoned that I would have a hard time understanding, but even the broadest understanding would be enough, if I could just hear them.

"One time, when we were sinking a new shaft," said my father as if he was imparting a great secret, "we found an Indian burial mound."

"Really? What was it like?"

"Well, we didn't get to see much of it because when we found it we had to turn the site over to the scientists. But I saw the skull of one of the Indians."

I could see the skull myself, rising from freshly-dug dirt, desolate and eerie. "What did it look like?" I asked in wonder.

"See, now there's the best part about our lives being a story," said my father. "It's a story that everyone can understand somehow. So even though I'd never met this Indian, and didn't know what he looked like or what he did in his life, his bones looked the same as mine. And my

bones will look just the same as a man three thousand years from now."

My father paused, as if this thought had consumed him. I watched him think, and I thought too. Then he shook himself. "I'm talking nonsense," he said with a laugh. "But it was interesting to see." We both saw it for a few moments longer, then he roused himself. "Well, I can't stay here talking all day; I've got to shovel more snow." And with that, he left.

I stayed, looking out at the snow. I knew I had told a story in the snow today, just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, that story would only last as long as the snow did. I thought I should probably write it down, but again, I didn't speak the language.

When we were called to come get my grandmother this time, it wasn't from her church. Mr. Ximenez called and said we had better come quick, because he wasn't sure what was wrong. I don't think he meant for the whole family to come, but my parents both went and they had to take Davy, and they didn't seem up to stopping me so I went too.

When we got there Mr. Ximenez was standing in the doorway. "I don't know what happened," he said, his face sorrowful. "Your mother, she showed up at our door an hour ago maybe, and asked if she could come inside and warm up. What could we say but yes, for this is what friends do, no?" As his agitation increased his linguistic skill seemed to diminish.

"What's happened?" asked my mother as she hurriedly brushed us all off so we could go inside. "Did she break something, or do something else bad?"

"Oh no," said Mr. Ximenez, "she was very polite, but it is not what she has done that I am worried."

"She said she was going to church," said my father. "I knew I shouldn't have let her go by herself in the snow."

Then all talking stopped because we had reached the living room and could see what had made Mr. Ximenez so anxious. My grandmother was slumped over on the couch, feebly drinking a cup of tea which Mrs. Ximenez was holding for her.

"Oh my God, what happened?" asked my father.

"I don't know, she just fell down on her way to look at our cross," said Mr. Ximenez. "Marie, she has made some tea and praise God she is drinking, but we were fearing she..." He stopped.

"Mom, are you all right?" asked my mother, kneeling beside Mrs. Ximenez. My grandmother didn't speak, but she nodded her head. None of us believed her.

"I should have known," said my father, berating himself. "I should have guessed. She hasn't been feeling well, and that means she wants to go to church. But she's never passed out before."

Mr. Ximenez spoke a long passage of another language to his wife, who responded in kind. "Perhaps she should stay here maybe," he said. "It would be no good thing to send one in her sickness out in the cold."

"No no, we can't do that," said my mother. "We can't ask you to take care of her, you barely have room for yourselves."

"Please, as a friend, I ask you, do not let her go out," Mr. Ximenez spoke carefully. "She would be surely worse for that. Here it is warm and she can be comfortable maybe."

"We would be honored," said Mrs. Ximenez, causing everyone to start and look at her, "if you accept our hospitality." She spoke slowly, as if choosing her words, but they still carried weight behind them.

Mrs. Lee was saying something, and I wasn't paying any attention. Then she said it again, and I realized she was talking to me. "Jeffrey, please pay attention!" she ordered. "Honestly, I think you're getting worse and worse." What she meant by that was anyone's guess. She could have been talking about my attention span, or my dumbness, or even just my odor. It didn't matter.

"Sorry ma'am," I said mechanically.

"Well, then perhaps you would do the next problem on the board," she said ruthlessly.

I walked up to the board slowly. My body was in school, but my mind was standing next to my grandmother and wondering what was wrong. Dr. Fanning was supposed to be seeing her right about now, and if God had listened to my pleas, we would have had a snow day so I could have been home and found out sooner. But God has a funny sense of humor that way, and so the sun had come out and the snow had begun to melt, and school was on.

The problem on the board was far too simple. And this time, I wasn't being egotistical; I was just being tired. The sooner I got the problem done, the sooner Mrs. Lee would leave me alone. Before I even registered the problem in my brain, my hands had already solved it and I was on my way back to my seat.

"Goodness Jeffrey, you must have eaten some magic beans," said Mrs. Lee in astonishment. "I thought that would take you at least five minutes."

If it had been the autumn and I had been me back then, I would have cringed, or thought that I was doomed. As it was, I just nodded. "I've been practicing," I said.

"Well, keep at it," she said with a smile.

Raul looked back and caught my eye. His gaze said, "You're even smarter than I thought," which somehow made me sad. I wasn't mad at Raul, but I suddenly realized that I shouldn't be smarter than anyone thought. People should just think I was who I was and not be surprised.

The clock ticked slowly on, and I was able to go for a good half an hour before I realized that Mrs. Lee was calling me again.

It was strange not having my mother in the house. It was strange not having my grandmother too, but she wasn't always there. But my mother seemed like a constant presence in my life, and to have her somewhere else simply added to my strange feelings.

What was more, we had Raul and Mr. Ximenez in our house, almost like the mother faerie had come and left us two other people in exchange for our mothers. It wasn't that it was bad to have them; on the contrary, Mr. Ximenez knew how to cook some very interesting dishes he said he'd learned from his parents. He didn't know many of them, but he prepared them well, and from practically nothing, or so it seemed. Both he and Raul were very quiet because they knew that it would be strange to be loud.

Davy got along famously with Mr. Ximenez, so much so that I think she was the happiest of the three family members still in the house. I felt strange, and my father obviously was both worried and saddened because his mother was ill. Actually, he knew more than I did, so he had even more reason to be sad.

Dr. Fanning came by every day to give my father an update, but they never let me be in the room. Once I heard something which sounded like my father was crying, but I didn't think I'd heard right. Mr. Ximenez would send Raul away too, and he and Davy and I would sit in the kitchen and wait. It didn't seem right to do anything.

"Boy, I've got some bad news," said my father to me as I walked in the door. "Your

grandma is dying."

I didn't know what to make of this. I was too young to really know what was going on; sure, I knew what death was, and I was probably better acquainted with it than my peers from my reading, but I had never actually had it happen to anyone I knew. Well, to be fair, my grandfather had died when I was alive, but I was only two at the time, so I couldn't be expected to count that.

"Oh," was all I could think to say. I knew that I was probably supposed to cry or ask why or something similar, but all I could feel was a little empty place that I didn't know how to fill.

My father gestured me over to sit beside him. "Your grandma had a stroke," he said sadly. "That's when you can't get blood..."

"To your brain, I know," I said, interrupting. I knew about strokes because of a history book I'd read. I didn't really know what they were, but I knew enough to be able to think I knew what they were.

"Right," my father said, not even phased by my interruption. "Dr. Fanning says he doesn't know how long she'll stay alive, and he's not sure how bad her brain was damaged, but we think soon."

I only heard him out of half an ear because I was wondering whether or not she would be able to talk to me. I suddenly wanted to hear her, even if she was just going on about God or the Bible. I wanted to see her spring up from her bed and kick Dr. Fanning out of her room. I wanted to see her with that look in her eye that said she was telling the truth and nobody knew it but her and me. I was crying and I didn't even realize it until my father put his arm around me and held me close.

It's not an easy thing to say goodbye, even if you're sure you'll see the person again. Some people just never do it, and maybe their lives are happier for it. But as for me, if I knew someone was going to be leaving, I felt I had to say goodbye.

I wasn't really old enough to say I'd known my grandmother for that long; she was family and I saw her every day, but I didn't really know her. I got the feeling that she knew me, as well as anyone could be expected to. Certainly she had known me all my life whereas I hadn't known her all of hers, but then my father hadn't either, and I think he knew her, at least in the way he wanted to. I only knew her as my grandmother, which is a strange thing; not quite your parents but closer than anyone else. She was near to me and yet far away at once.

She was lying there on the Ximenez's couch where she had been since she had first been put there. Her chest rose and fell and I sighed, letting go a worry I hadn't even known I was feeling. She was still alive. She could hear me.

"Hi Grandma," I said softly.

Her eyes panned down from the ceiling to my face and she smiled, just around her eyes, but I could see it. Dr. Fanning said she couldn't talk but I guess I was disappointed that the rule applied to me as well. I thought, for a moment, that she would be able to talk to me since she had talked to me before when no one else would.

"Are you feeling any better?" I asked stupidly, knowing as I said it that it was a ridiculous question. Of course she wasn't feeling any better. She was only still alive because my mother and Mrs. Ximenez had been giving her liquid through a tube. But she didn't seem to mind my asking. Maybe she was feeling better, even if she wasn't doing better.

I couldn't cry, I told myself. It would make her upset. I had to just keep smiling and talking and then maybe I could get the words out. "I brought you something," I said, my voice shaking a little but remaining firm. "I brought your Bible. And the preacher said he was praying

for you and he'd stop by a little later to see you himself. He had to..." I stopped myself, because I couldn't say that he had to go to a funeral; it wouldn't be fair. "He had to do something this afternoon. So I brought your Bible so you'd have it when he got here."

My grandmother couldn't lift her arm, she couldn't even turn her head, but she smiled at me again with just her eyes. They were sad but happy at the same time, and I couldn't figure out why. I cautiously went over to her, because it seemed like the right thing to do, and we were both uncomfortable with the separation. Close up she didn't smell very good and that alone almost made me cry, because she didn't smell like my grandmother anymore. But her eyes met mine and she gave me a look which said, "I may not smell too good boy, but I'm still your grandmother, and don't you forget it." For some reason I almost laughed at that, and then I did, because she obviously wanted me to.

"Shall I put it under your hand?" I asked hesitantly, not sure if I should move her. I don't know how she did it, but somehow her eyes nodded, so I gingerly raised her right hand and softly laid it on top of the Bible.

"Thank you," her eyes said, so I said, "You're welcome," and tried to smile again but I just couldn't.

Now I had to do it. My father said I might not see her again, that she might die while I was asleep, or even within the hour. He was even concerned that she might die while I was in the room, so he almost didn't let me go in, but I told him she wouldn't die with me there, and I guess he believed me. I knew she wouldn't die with me in the room for two reasons: first, she wasn't that mean, and second, she would want to wait at least until her preacher came by. I couldn't imagine her going without one last Hallelujah. The thought made me laugh, and then start to cry because I knew she wouldn't be able to say "Hallelujah."

Then I couldn't stop myself, and I cried and cried, just standing there next to her, worrying all the time that she would be sad or hurt that I was crying, or that she might die with me in the room after all, but not able to stop. And I don't know how, but I felt her hand on mine, and I almost heard her say she didn't mind. "As long as you don't start cursing," she said to me sternly, and I shook my head, because I didn't want to upset her.

Then I couldn't stand it any more. I either had to say it or I had to leave right then, because I couldn't stay there any more. So I looked up at her face, which was wobbly thought the tears, and looked her in the eye, and said, "Goodbye Grandma." The words came much more easily than I thought they would, and I wondered for a moment if I was being cold-hearted, saying goodbye while she was still alive. Then I saw in her eye that she was crying too, and for a second I knew that she was just as sad to leave as we were to see her go, but not because she wanted to keep living. She was sad because she knew that having to say goodbye made us sad.

"I love you Grandma," I said sadly, even though she already knew it, but then I wasn't saying it for her. I was saying it for me. And then I had to go, or I wouldn't be able to keep from sobbing. Her eyes smiled at me and said she understood, but it didn't make me feel any better.

Later, when I saw her eyes in my mind and I remembered the brief moment when I could see them and really know how she felt, I realized that they were the same eyes I saw sometimes when she wasn't just being Biblical and ranting and raving. They were the eyes she had when she wasn't slapping my father for his language or sulking over corn on the cob. They were the eyes of someone who sees things and loves things and doesn't know why.

"Jeff, I heard that your Grandma died," said Mullins as he sat next to me on the playground wall. I was sitting there because I didn't feel like being anywhere else. It wasn't that

I was too sad to do anything, I just didn't really want to that day.

I turned to Mullins and wondered how he heard, then I decided that Raul must have said something to explain why I was acting so strange. I waited for whatever dumb thing was going to come out of Mullins' mouth on the subject. Probably it would be something unintentional, because Mullins was never mean, just dumb sometimes.

"I just wanted to say sorry," he said simply, like it had just come to him. This was quite different from usual, because with anything he said that didn't involve food he usually sounded like he'd taken five minutes to figure out what to say. "My Granddad died a few months ago, during the summer," he said, and I dimly recalled noticing something back then, but I'd never really found out what it was. "I was sad, and he didn't even live with us."

I couldn't say anything, because I wasn't sure what to say. It was the only thing anyone had said to me all day; no one had even asked why I was down, or anything like that. Raul hadn't said anything, but that was different; he was nearly family at this point, and he knew exactly what was going on. His father looked nearly as sad today as my father, and the whole family had insisted on arranging the funeral with my grandmother's church. I wasn't sure how that would go, since they didn't seem like the kind of people who would go to my grandmother's church, but even if we had to talk to the church ourselves, the Ximenezes were still going to make food and organize the supper afterwards.

"I remember my Granddad used to tell stories about when he was in the Army," Mullins continued. "He had a million of them; one time, he was by a stream skinny-dipping, and a bear stole all his clothing and he had to walk back to base naked." Mullins laughed. I smiled a little; I'd never met Mullins' grandfather, but I could picture an older Mullins and pretend. "I never believed that one, but he swore it was true." Mullins lapsed into silence.

"My Grandma used to tell a story about Vitamin K," I said, remembering. "She said that all the letters between F and K made people sick, so they had to skip to K because it didn't make people very sick." I laughed. "I think she was just making that up. I've never had Vitamin K though, so she might have been telling the truth."

"Yeah, vitamins are weird," said Mullins. "My mother's always telling me to eat my vitamins, but they're always in food that tastes really bad, like Brussels sprouts and broccoli. Why can't there be vitamins in candy?"

He made a good point. Vitamins were usually in food that I didn't like to eat either. I didn't even mind that he'd brought up food, since technically I'd brought it up.

"Do you miss your grandfather?" I asked Mullins.

"Yeah," he said. "I miss his pipe the most. He smoked a big black pipe and he always smelled like it."

"My Grandma always went around quoting from the Bible," I said with a sad smile. "No matter what we were doing, she'd have a quote for it. And she used to chase Dr. Fanning all around the house trying to throw holy water on him."

"Wow, she sounds like she was way funnier than my Granddad," said Mullins with a grin. "All he ever did was try to cook food for us when we went to visit. He always made weird things like cabbage pie or beef and bacon with mustard sauce. If we got lucky, it would be edible. And he always ate it, no matter what it was, and said it was fantastic, and why weren't we eating ours."

I grinned at that. "My Grandma didn't like to cook, so that sounds pretty crazy to me."

"All grandparents are crazy," said Mullins astutely. "You just get used to them. I feel sorry for kids who don't have any."

"Yeah," I agreed. Then we both sat in silence, thinking about how bad it must be not to have any grandparents at all, until the bell rang.

Davy and I were sitting in the living room when the call came. I ignored it, and she may have, although her head did swivel in the direction of the ring for a moment or two. But then she got back to business; she was trying to teach me how to draw a machine. She pointed to places and I would draw things there, and if she didn't like what she saw, she made me erase and do it again. For this reason I was drawing in pencil, although Davy made it clear that the only way to truly draw was with several different colors of crayon, otherwise all the lines would look the same.

I was halfway through a crosshatched thing with an antenna when my mother called me into the kitchen. "That was the school," she said. "They want an answer."

I knew what the question was, but I decided to play a little dumb just to make sure. "What answer?" I asked.

"Whether or not we're going to let you move up a grade," said my mother straightforwardly. "You knew this would happen sometime boy, so now it's happened."

"How long until I have to decide?"

"Today. Now. They're waiting for me to call them back after I talk to you."

This was not where I liked to be as far as decision-making went. Which wasn't very far, usually, since I generally hemmed and hawed until the decision was either moot or made for me. I was the kid who would hold up the lunch line for five minutes trying to decide whether I wanted chocolate or regular milk, at least until I stopped buying milk because it was too expensive. Then someone would hand me one or the other and shove me out of the way, which is, I suppose, what I'd expected this time too. I wasn't completely comfortable with freedom of choice.

"Okay, so let's talk about it," said my mother, seeing my expression was not signifying an immediate response. "Why do you want to stay in Third Grade?"

I couldn't answer. I guess I wanted to stay because there was already too much change in the world and I wanted something to be constant. If that constant had to be boredom, then so be it; at least it would be the same boredom every day, which made it easy to get used to and forget.

"I told you, I'm going to be unhappy in either place, so I'd rather be bored and have lots of free time than be bored and overworked."

"So why don't you want to stay? Why not just tell them you're staying right now?"

Another good question, one which was even more difficult to explain. How could I say that I was worried that all this playing dumb was making me dumber? How could I say that I wanted to move ahead so I could get the whole thing over with more quickly? Neither of those were particularly good reasons.

"Well... I think I'm getting dumber."

My mother looked a little puzzled. "You're not getting dumber," she said kindly. "You're still smart as a whip and you're going to be that way all through your life as long as you choose to be."

"See, that's just it," I said, glad that she'd given me a toehold. "I'm not choosing to be by staying in Third Grade. I did a problem on the board a while ago and I got it wrong. A problem I should be able to do in my sleep. And Leek fixed it before I could even figure out what was wrong. Leek, the kid who spends all day wishing she could be out in the fields."

"Oh, I see," said my mother more seriously. "So you're afraid that by underachieving,

you'll lock yourself into that pattern and stop being smart?"

"I guess."

"Well then there's a solution to that. Stop underachieving."

"But I already told you, I don't want to move up. I'd be the youngest kid in the class and I wouldn't know anyone."

"You're right about that, and that's why I would push for staying where you are until next year, when you can start out in the next class. That way it won't be in the middle of the year. But I didn't mean that to stop underachieving you had to move up a grade."

"You didn't?" It was my turn to look puzzled.

"Why not just let your smarts show in Third Grade. Mrs. Lee would be very happy if you did, and you might even be able to help other people in your class, like you do with Raul."

"But what about the math problem on the board?"

"Well, that was being careless and maybe a little arrogant," said my mother, in a tone which suggested she was not trying to sugar-coat the truth. "Don't think you know everything, and pay attention." She paused, seeing my face. "And don't let it get to you," she said finally, with a smile. "Everyone messes up sometimes. People have bad days, or they're just not as good as they thought, or they get tired. It happens. It's no big deal if once in a while you mess up a math problem. Shows you're human."

I pondered. "So you think I should just be myself in Third Grade and wait and see until next year?" I asked.

"Boy, I'm not making your decision for you," she said stonily. "We'll support whatever decision you make, but you have to make it. Some day you'll have to make harder decisions than this, and you'd better be ready for them."

I sighed. I didn't like being told about the future, because adults always tell it from the wrong point of view. They don't tell it like adults, because they don't think that would make sense to kids, but they can't tell it like kids, because then they wouldn't have the experience to talk about. So they try to tell it like kids but it always comes out sounding confusing and scary, when in fact when you get there it really isn't. As a kid, you couldn't handle being an adult, that's true, but when you become an adult, magically, you are able to. At least, most of the time.

"So I'm going to dial the school, and you're going to tell me," my mother said sternly.

As she dialed, I knew what my decision was. And it wasn't chocolate milk.

"And then the pirate king shouted from the mainsail, 'There's the ship we're after!' And all the crew jumped and cheered."

Mrs. Ximenez spoke a few more sentences of what I had been told was French. "You see, there was treasure on the ship but not ordinary treasure. That ship had a map which legend said pointed to El Dorado," Mr. Ximenez translated.

"That's not what she said," Raul broke in. "She said it was a map to the Golden City."

"Oh, but that is the same thing," said Mr. Ximenez, laughing. "El Dorado is where the King of the Indians lived, and he had so much wealth it is said that he rolled in gold dust to clean himself. Many people have searched for this El Dorado, but there has been no one who found it."

Mrs. Ximenez said something which didn't sound like a story. "Oh, of course," Mr. Ximenez said, smacking his head. "I meant that no one was finding it until these pirates. And no one found it after that because... well, maybe Mama will finish the story and you shall know."

"I read a story about Conquistadors and El Dorado," I volunteered. "They said that it was

deep in the Andes Mountains, so high up that half of them died from the cold and thin air before they even reached it. And then they couldn't bring any gold back, because they couldn't carry it, so they decided that they would draw lots, and the one who lost would have to go back to civilization and bring others. So the man who lost went back to civilization, but by the time he got there he was totally mad and could only see the golden city in his mind."

"Ah, that is yes a very good story," said Mr. Ximenez. "It is a pity you have told us the ending, for maybe next time you could have told us that story. Now we shall have to wait until we all forget it before it can be told again." He smiled at this. I got the impression that this was some axiom of the clan Ximenez, although whether it was Mrs. Ximenez's policy I could not tell.

Mrs. Ximenez spoke again, more lyrical this time. "So the pirates sailed after the ship, but they couldn't catch it because it was a ghost ship, with devils for a crew," translated Mr. Ximenez.

"How did the ghost ship get the map?" asked Raul curiously. I had to confess that this was of interest to me as well.

"Ah, but that is a story for another evening," said Mr. Ximenez. "Now we must focus on the pirates, maybe." He grinned.

Mrs. Ximenez spoke again, and this time I could pick out a few words which sounded like English. That in and of itself was fascinating, and the story was just an added bonus. "What was the pirate king to do?" asked Mr. Ximenez with wide eyes. "They could not catch this cursed ship. So the pirate king called upon the oldest and most deformed man in his crew, whose name was..." Mr. Ximenez paused for dramatic emphasis.

"Eyeless Joe," said Mrs. Ximenez, taking both Raul and I by surprise. She said "eyeless" with a trailing hiss that made the name sound all the more terrifying, and "Joe" was not so much "Joe" as it was a whisper, "Zho!"

"Wow, Eyeless Joe," said Raul.

"I bet he'll know what to do, the old pirates always know what to do," I said with certainty, not unfounded, for I had read a rather large number of pirate books in my day.

Mrs. Ximenez continued, with running translation by Mr. Ximenez. "Eyeless Joe couldn't see the present, but he could look into other worlds and see things no one else could see," said Mr. Ximenez in a low and fearful voice. "He saw that the only way to catch the cursed ship was to sacrifice one of the crew to dark powers."

"What dark powers?" asked Raul.

"They cannot be named!" said Mr. Ximenez in mock shock. "To name them is to invite them into your home, and then all you can do is pray to Jesus Son of God," and here Mr. Ximenez crossed himself, followed by his wife and son, "to save you. We must not speak their names."

"Christ defend us," murmured Mrs. Ximenez. She'd learned most of her English through missionaries and the church, so religious topics were her largest vocabulary. I didn't know it of course, but she could be even more articulate on the subject of religion in Latin, which was made for that sort of thing.

"I don't know," I said, and everyone turned to look at me.

"You don't know what?" asked Mr. Ximenez.

"I don't know if we would have to worry if they came after us," I said.

"Why?" asked Mr. Ximenez, confused.

"Well, my Grandma certainly wouldn't stand for that sort of thing. She was very

negative toward dark powers of any kind. So I think that she'd probably keep them away, from this room at least." I didn't know why I said that, and I still don't.

"You are right," said Mr. Ximenez, tousling my hair. "Your grandmother was a sainted woman, and she loved you very much I think." I nodded. "But we still should not name them, because I do not think she would approve," Mr. Ximenez continued with a smile, and I was forced to agree with him. I wasn't firm on the subject of ghosts, having read too many books to be able to decide one way or the other, but I was sure that, if there were ghosts, and my grandmother heard us talking about Satan, she would definitely lobby to become one just so she could haunt us and shout Bible passages.

"So the pirates had to draw lots to see who would be the one sacrificed," Mrs. Ximenez continued, and so did Mr. Ximenez. "And when the last lot had been drawn, whose was it do you think?"

"The cabin boy?" guessed Raul.

"The pirate king," I said, rather certain that, even if this wasn't the answer, it would make for a good story.

"Who? Who?" asked Raul, anxious to get on with it.

"But this maybe we shall find out tomorrow," said Mr. Ximenez with a parental air. "Now it is time for Jeffrey to return to his family and for you to be with yours."

Our protestations were to no avail. Mrs. Ximenez laughed at our pouting faces and kissed each of us on the cheek, then disappeared into the kitchen to prepare dinner no doubt. Raul dejectedly turned and went up the stairs to his room. I waved goodbye to him sadly and put on my coat; it was no longer snowy, but the wind was still cold.

"Jeffrey, please do problem twelve on the board for everyone," said Mrs. Lee. I nodded and walked up to the front slowly but steadily. I might have decided to show my true colors to the world, but that didn't make math problems on the board any less annoying.

"Attention students, this is the Principal speaking," said the speaker above my head, somewhat louder than it really had to be. "Today is Mr. Grouer's birthday, so if you see him, be sure to wish him the best. Also, our charity drive will be kicking off in a few days, so everyone remember to save those nickels."

I realized that I hadn't bought a book in ages, and that I must have several dollars of allowance saved up. Did I want to donate to the charity drive? It was a tough decision; on the one hand, I did sometimes feel charitable, but on the other, several dollars was a lot of money. Perhaps I would donate some, but save some too. It could all be decided later anyway.

"The slogan for today is: 'No matter where you go, there you are.' So remember that, children, whenever you go somewhere today. Now let's all stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, said today by Lynne Forbish from Mrs. Kleggman's class."

I was already standing, so I had a moment to contemplate. I hadn't seen Lynne in several days, possibly a week, and now that I thought about it, that didn't seem to bother me. In fact, as she started to say the Pledge, I realized that her voice actually annoyed me, probably more than math problems on the board or even studying slimy reptiles. Then the Pledge was over and I had to return to math problems on the board, which, when not compared with Lynne, were quite annoying, certainly annoying enough to stand on their own.

"Pass the cheese," said my father moodily. It was spaghetti night again, and he was convinced that it had been spaghetti night only last week, which meant that it was two spaghetti

weeks nearly in a row. Actually, he was wrong, because the last spaghetti night we'd had was when my mother froze the bread for this spaghetti night, and that was quite a long time ago.

I was eating a few strands of spaghetti, but my real target was the garlic bread, which I found improved with age. The flavors became much more mellow and the bread got flakier, which made the whole experience tingle in my spine.

Davy was eating spaghetti too, chopped up, with a little sauce and cheese, likewise smashed. She was too young still to eat garlic bread, a fact which caused me to feel a tremendous amount of pity for her during spaghetti nights, but which she didn't seem to mind. She was just happy to be getting other things than strained vegetables. She still got those often enough of course, but more and more frequently, my mother either converted what we were eating into Davy food, or made something out of the same ingredients which Davy could eat. When we had turkey, she had mashed potatoes and gravy and sometimes a few small bits of turkey which weren't large enough to choke her. When we had meatloaf, my mother kept aside a special little piece of it which she cooked with ketchup to make a disgusting mixture which Davy seemed to find rather toothsome.

Between all this, plus the fact that she was able to pull herself up on things, Davy was getting old quickly. I figured it would only be a few more months until she started stealing my books to read. Perhaps I was a little optimistic, time-table-wise, but Davy was a rather amazing child in some ways, so it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility.

I snagged another piece of garlic bread. "You want a little spaghetti with that?" asked my father snidely. My mouth was full, so all I could do was point to the spaghetti I already had, but that was enough.

"I invited Domingo and Marie and Raul over for dinner next week," said my mother. "I told them we would have extra-special pudding." She smiled, and my father and I exchanged glances. If he was thinking what I was thinking, and I figured he must have been, then we had to stop my mother from making her birthday pudding for the Ximenezes, otherwise they might either die or never speak to us again.

"Dear, you're not planning on making... that pudding, are you?" asked my father nonchalantly.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked my mother, looking shocked but probably faking.

"You know what I mean," said my father with a bit more intensity. "The pudding you always make for yourself for your birthday."

"Oh, that pudding," said my mother. "Well, I had been planning on making chocolate pudding, but since you mention it, maybe that would be more special." She had a very self-satisfied smile on her face, and we all hated her for it.

Instead of joining in the argument, I set to thinking about how I could prepare the Ximenez family for an onslaught of my mother's special pudding. I thought for so long that I didn't even realize the pudding of the evening had been served. It was coconut, which, considering, could have been much worse. My mother, ever since she no longer had to worry about my grandmother, had taken to serving tapioca at every other meal. Sometimes she tried to sneak tapioca in twice in a row, but my father put his foot down on that one.

Maybe I could tell them that my mother had become mentally ill and that, to humor her, we had to all act normally but we should under no circumstances eat the pudding. That seemed a bit implausible. Then I pondered telling them that my mother had become a sculptor and her medium was pudding, so she would be giving out pudding but it wasn't to eat, it was to look at. That probably would fall flat too, because my mother would undoubtedly tell them to eat it, plus

she herself would eat it.

I ruminated on various diversion tactics, like accidentally breaking all the bowls in the house. But my mother would undoubtedly serve the pudding in cups or on plates if necessary. There was a possibility that I could distract the Ximenezes long enough to steal their pudding, so no one would know. That seemed like it would take an awfully big distraction. I finally came to the conclusion that the pudding was inescapable. Next week, the family Ximenez would meet my mother's birthday pudding.

"Can I come over after school too?" asked Mullins.

Raul and I looked at each other. I would have said no in a heartbeat a month ago, but since then, Mullins had grown on my slightly. I still thought he was fat, but not in a bad way, and I thought he was stupid, but that wasn't his fault. I certainly didn't hate him anymore, although sometimes he could get on one's nerves. If I was going to say no, it would have to be nice. If I was going to say yes, I would have to live with the consequences.

"I'll ask my father, but I bet he'll say yes," said Raul before I could even begin. "We can all look at division together."

"Neat," said Mullins. "Say, are you going to finish that?" Without waiting for an answer he took the crusts of Raul's sandwich and ate them. Since Raul never ate his crusts, the question had been a mere formality, but since Mullins usually didn't even ask, it was something.

"You guys study after school?" asked Leek. "Why?"

"Well, Jeffrey..." began Raul, then stopped and looked at me. I nodded. "Jeffrey is super smart, so he helps me with problems I have."

"Really?" asked Leek. "You're super smart?"

"He's being too nice," I said, embarrassed. "I just understand some things he doesn't."

"Don't listen to him," said Raul with a playful jab at me. "He reads books. Books with big words and lots of pages, and sometimes not even any pictures."

"I read a book once," said Mullins. "It was about horses, because I've always wanted a horse. My Dad says we can't afford it, but I wish sometimes."

"I have horses," said Leek. "Three of them." Leek lived on the outskirts of town on a farm, which I suppose could explain the bare feet and desire to run through the fields. "I even can ride them."

"Wow," said Mullins and Raul at almost the same time. And just like that, my super smarts were forgotten as they asked Leek all kinds of questions about her horses.

I hated it. My father hated it. Davy hated it. Raul hated it.

Mr. and Mrs. Ximenez asked for the recipe.

I was walking home from school, like any other day, when I saw it. The sign said closed, and there was nothing in the windows. Federman's Odd Shop had gone out of business.

I was still grasping this idea as I raced over to look in. Inside were a number of empty shelves, the desk behind which Old Man Federman used to sit and scowl, and a lot of dust and scraps of paper. No books. No collection of horror. Nothing.

I felt rather than heard someone else approaching. I could barely keep the tears from my eyes as I turned. Before I could even see who it was, a familiar voice was heard.

"Hey stranger, what's got you looking so down in the mouth?"

I couldn't even say it, so I just let Stacy come closer so she could see for herself. When

she got to me, she stopped and turned, then a ghastly look came over her face. "Where are they?" she asked in a frightened tone.

"I don't know," I said, wondering just why Stacy would care about Federman's.

"First my collection, now this," she said, and I could see a tear forming in the corner of her eye. I had no idea what she was talking about, but she seemed distressed.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. "I mean, why is this making you so upset?"

"You idiot, because I nearly had enough saved up to buy the collection, and now he's gone!" She turned on me in fury. "I had been saving up since I was in kindergarten. Every Christmas I would just ask for money for my account. Every birthday I didn't get presents. Even after my house burned down I was still going to be able to buy those books to replace mine, and now he's gone!" She turned and ran down the street away from me.

This was too much to absorb in one go, so I carefully stood there, replaying it in my brain, until I thought I had a fairly clear idea of what was going on. Then my jaw dropped.

"Coal stocks are lower than ever." That was my father. He was sitting with his paper opened on the couch, looking at the financial section.

"When things warm up they always are." That was my mother. She was calling in from the kitchen, where she was making our tenth meal of roast beef, which would hopefully be the last of it. It had begun to show signs of going strange, and we were all hoping we could finish it before it went strange good and proper.

"Why is the fact that coal stocks are down a problem?" I asked my father. Precocious I might be, but finance was a world in and of itself, and I was definitely not privy to its machinations.

"You see boy, when the stocks go down, that means that coal is worth less, which means that the company I work for has to sell it for less, which means that either they have to sell more of it, or they have to stop spending so much to get it. If they don't make a profit they're in trouble. I'm just hoping they decide to sell more; at least then I'll have a job, even though I'll be pulling triple shifts."

"You always say that and you never get fired," said my mother.

"I did that one time," said my father argumentatively.

"Okay, so once you did get fired, but that wasn't because of coal stocks." My mother was not one to lose and argument.

"It was interrelated with them," said my father studiously, as if he was desperately trying to make a point with very little to back him up. This, of course, was true, so it was normal that he seemed that way. My father was not a very good arguer, but he did it often, although usually against the wrong people.

"That's hogwash and you know it," laughed my mother, because she knew she'd won.

My father sulked. "Well it's a worry anyway," he said.

Davy was seated below us on the floor, drawing away. Every few minutes she would turn and look at us as if she was expecting something. Whatever it was, it never arrived.

"Look, stranger, I... well, I didn't mean to snap at you." It had taken nearly three days for Stacy to apologize to me, which I certainly hadn't expected. Rather, I had been expecting something horrible in the form of a dead rat in my food or making Jolly think I was worth paying attention to. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect an apology.

"I was just sad about the books," she continued. I was sitting on the playground wall,

alone for a change, and had been reading a book about dinosaurs before she came up to me. I had become quite interested with dinosaurs because I wanted to learn their stories, as my father had wanted once. Well, he still did actually, he just didn't let it out much.

"Me too," I said. "That's why I looked down when you first saw me. But I didn't know you... well, that you read those sorts of books."

"Yeah, I had the whole *Saga of the Dark Knights* before the fire," she said, sitting down beside me. "Now I'll have to buy them all again I guess."

"Wow, I have nearly all of them," I said. "What happens at the end? Does Sir Mortimer get banished or does the Caliph decide to behead him after all?"

"I can't tell you that," she said with a wicked grin. "You have to find out for yourself. It's no good reading the end before you finish the middle."

I didn't have anything to say to that. I guessed I could eventually buy the remaining books, but that seemed like it would take forever.

"So you liked to look in Federman's too?" she said, more of a statement than a question. "I can't count the number of times he chased me away. I wonder what happened?"

"I bet all the meanness in his soul made him turn into a toad," I said jokingly.

"No no, toads aren't for meanness, toads are for greed. What books have you been reading, stranger?"

"Actually, I thought the only way you could turn into a toad was to have an evil witch put a curse on you."

"That's just urban legend; to become a toad, you have to lead a life of greed. Witches don't turn people into anything; they just tell them things that will make them do bad things and get killed, like with Macbeth."

"I don't know, I'm pretty sure I've seen some witches put toad curses on people," I said dubiously, although inwardly we were both laughing.

"Well, if that's the way you're going to be, well I'll just have to take my vast knowledge of toad conversions and go somewhere else," she said haughtily, but she couldn't help smiling. "Okay, you win, I'm laughing," she finally giggled. "But I really do have to go; there's a mudball I've been making for the past three days that should be baked nice and hard and I need to find someone to throw it at."

I laughed at that. "You bake mudballs?"

"Oh yeah, that's the only way to get them nice and painful," she said expertly. "Maybe Old Man Federman died and they're going to sell off all his books for cheap. Well, see you around, stranger."

I nearly stopped her and told her to call me Jeffrey, but then I thought better of it. Stranger wasn't a bad name to have. Kind of mysterious. Someone who maybe would be cloaked in black and wield a flaming sword as he captained the dread S.S. Disembowel. I walked back toward the school, waving an imaginary sword and muttering inscrutable oaths under my breath.

Davy was sitting on my feet. I don't know how or why she was there, but she had apparently decided that it would be a good idea, and so there she was. She wasn't drawing diagrams or designs or anything else; she was just sitting on my feet looking pensive.

I was reading a book about telling stories. I wanted to get as good as Mrs. Ximenez, although to be fair, Mr. Ximenez deserved a decent amount of the credit. Still, I had all kinds of ideas, but I didn't know where to go with them, so I was trying to figure that out. I was finding,

as so many others had found before me, that books about books are terribly dry and difficult to sit through. Sheer determination was all that was keeping me reading this one.

"You can choose several different types of narration: the omniscient narrator, the personal narrative, or the storyteller, among others." I scowled. "Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't I have a narrator who's dead, or one who can't talk? Those should be allowed." Seeing that yelling at the book was not going to get me anywhere, I asked Davy, "Davy, if you were writing a book, what narrator would you have?"

Davy turned to me, stared straight into my eyes, and told me with one word. After that there was a lot of yelling and celebrating and kissing Davy and bouncing her up and down and calling relatives and all the other things which come with a baby's first word. And through it all, the only thing I could think was, "How did she know my real name?"