

# The Path of Our Destiny

By

Calvin Louis Fudge

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## NOTE TO READERS

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events exist only in my imagination. They do not depict any living or dead persons, and the events are just made up.

I have taken liberties in writing about my hometown of El Dorado (El-doe-rae-doe), Arkansas. Perhaps the most noticeable one: Hunt delivering newspapers in the afternoon in the 1950s—only because it served my purposes. I am aware that no evening papers have been delivered in El Dorado since I was a boy.

I apologize to any Camden, Arkansas, reader for using your beautiful River Park before it was there.

Calvin Louis Fudge  
December 2007  
El Dorado, Arkansas



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Finally, my thanks to the nice people at the UPS Store for all their friendly assistance.



## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Jimmy Benefield—scholar, confidant, fellow traveler and best friend for half a century. He has known me during my times of tallest mountain highs and my lowest valley lows, witnessing my good points as well as the bad as we traveled thousands of happy miles on distant roads, shared countless lunches and dinners in imaginary “Shangri-Las” as we discussed this project and many others during warm noons and cold late nights. Bless his house and all within it.



*"No love, no friendship can cross the path of our destiny  
without leaving some mark on it forever."*

—Francois Mauriac



## Part I

### ONE

I was ready to begin seventh grade that September of 1955 with hidden sadness and smoldering defiance because of my home life. My thirty-year-old mother was dying of cancer. I knew it, and she knew I knew it, but still she was trying to make it as easy for me as she possibly could by not talking about the advanced illness in my presence. As a result of the late-detected breast cancer that had spread to her lungs and other parts of her body, she looked like a skinny, unkempt woman of fifty, according to the talk of the neighborhood. I could remember her as a pretty, blue-eyed, almost black-haired woman who was vivacious, loving and a wonderfully self-assured mom. But illness and treatments, that had begun too late, had taken a huge toll on her looks as well as her functions as wife and mother. The swelling and puffiness in her face had completely diminished her finely chiseled features. These days she rarely smiled. I discovered her hiding and crying at times.

My father, who had never been good at showing or expressing his concerns of any kind, was more aloof than ever. Perhaps his being uneducated made it more difficult for him. His work in the local oil fields—checking old, worn-out oil rigs, some of the last wells that were still slowly producing, kept him long hours many days. The fact that the oil fields—once flourishing in this area—were dying out, and his limited work skills would cause him problems in moving into another field of work was on his mind constantly, I now think. Many nights when he would return

home late, it was obvious, even to a young son, that he had been spending too much time with a few understanding fellow laborers in the local bar before they decided to call it a day and go home to face whatever waited for them there.

I had never had a pet of any kind, mainly because each time I asked about a puppy I was told we couldn't afford one, and, too, we had no yard fence in front or back, and my dad said no dogs or cats allowed in the house. And my mother said kindly, "That is final. We can't go against your father's wishes." However, on the afternoon before I was to start school the next morning I was on my way home after piano lessons, and I stopped at a friend's house. Their dog, part hound and only-God-knew-what-else, had a litter of nine, and my friend's mom was doing any and everything she could think of to find these growing, hungry pups new homes.

"James Hunt Hews," my friend's mom always called me by my full name, "don't you want one of these pups?" she snatched up a rambunctious brown-and-white creature and thrust him into my arms.

Before I could react, the wiggling, wagging thing was licking my face, ears and neck. I was smiling, yearningly, as I said, "I'd like to have him, but my daddy won't let me have a dog."

"Who ever heard of a man not letting his boy have a pup?" she said good-naturedly. "James Hunt Hews, take the dog home with you. He won't care. Oh, he may holler at you, but it'll pass. Take him home with you. Give 'im a piece of bread. Go on....Tell your mama hi for me."

Hugging the pup to me, I was sure I could feel the animal's heart beating as fast as my own. Five minutes later I was going through the kitchen door at my house.

"Son," my mother said, with concern, "what're you doing with that pup? You know you can't keep it."

"Please, Mother," I pleaded. "I ain't never had a pet. Why can't I keep it? Other boys have dogs. Some even have cats and dogs. Bobby's got a rabbit and a dog. John's got—"

"You know your father won't let you have it. Let's not worry him. He has enough to worry about as it is just to pay rent and buy food for us.... Son, I know you want a pet. Really I do, but..."

"Mother, can I just keep him till Daddy gets home? If he says I can't, I'll take him back." I was desperate.

"Hunt, aren't things bad enough?" She started to cry and left the room.

I was torn between my wants and longings and my mother's feelings. I took the pup outside and dropped to the ground with him in my arms and began to roll, talking to my new dog. All the while the pup was washing my face and neck, and I was laughing. What could I name him? I'd think of something.

Suppertime came, and Mother called me to eat. I carried the pup into the kitchen in my arms.

"Hunt, you can't keep that pup, and you know it." It was obvious she

had been crying for awhile, and she looked weak. I didn't know what to do, so I just kept silent.

"Go wash your face and hands before you sit down to eat," she said sadly. "Leave the dog here," she said as I started for the bathroom with the pup still in my arms.

When I returned to eat, the pup was on the back porch lapping milk from a dish.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked, hoping he would be there so that I could ask to keep my new pet; also dreading for him to be there because I feared his words of refusal.

"He's not home yet. Eat your supper. He'll be home soon." She looked so sad and thin to me as she only picked at a small portion of food on her plate.

Before I could finish gulping my food, the pup had finished his milk and set up a howl at the screen door. I jumped up and started for the door.

"Hunt!" my mother said a little loudly for her, and then, "Son, please don't get your hopes up too high. Please be reasonable. You know your father has a lot to worry about."

"I'm just a kid, Mother, why can't I be like other boys? I can't ever have fun like other kids!" My voice had risen much too high on that last sentence. My mother reacted quickly, rushing from the table toward the living room. I was remorseful immediately, seeing what my words had done to her. I loved her. She was my one constant. I knew she suffered from her illness. I had seen more—much more—than she ever knew I saw: the way she reacted to going and coming to appointments. The way she treated me, with even more kindness and understanding, after bouts with my father when he would shout at her, say harsh, even hateful things to her. There were times when I wanted to fly into him with both fists. But why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn't I be just a normal kid like everybody else? I ran into the living room to where Mother stood looking out a window, twisting a wet handkerchief in her fingers. I felt a dull ache in my heart, and it was more than I could handle. My cries and tears of confusion turned my mother swiftly and I was in her arms.

"I'm so sorry, Mother. Please don't cry so. I'm so sorry. I'll get a job. I don't need to go to school. I'll make some money, and you won't have to worry so..."

"Oh, my darling son," she sobbed. "I'm sorry. You're carrying the weight of an adult on your shoulders, and it's not fair. Now, you stop crying. You can keep the puppy. I'll speak with your daddy."

\*\*\*

It was very late when my father arrived. I was sound asleep when his drunken shouting woke me. I heard my mother sob and his slurred, "That's what wrong with that boy now! You pamper him. Can't you ever say no! Just no!"

"He's just a boy, Bob," was her weak reply.

"Well, he can't have the damn dog, and that's that."

"Please," she whimpered.

And then I heard the slap that sent her sprawling. Both the pup and I were wide awake now. I fell out of bed in my anger, and as I half-ran, half-stumbled into their bedroom, the pup at my heels, I flew into the tall, lanky man with all my strength. In his drunken state, he lost his balance and crumpled to the floor. My mother was softly crying, my daddy cursing and my puppy was nipping and growling at the man as I hit him anywhere I could with my fists.

It all happened so swiftly that I could not really comprehend exactly what was taking place, but my father grabbed me by the back of the neck and pushed me against the floor so hard that I screamed, "I'll kill you! I hate you!"

The pup was growling and hanging onto his ankle until Daddy seized the small animal by a hind leg and flung it against a wall with such force that it trembled only briefly and lay still.

I crawled to the dead pup and cradled it in my arms and wept weakly. Mother got slowly to her feet and came to me, putting her arms around me and the pup.

"Damn you, Bob," she said simply and with amazing calmness.

Daddy rolled on the floor and scrambled to get to his feet. He looked around the room with glazed eyes, and it seemed that what he observed swept over him with some kind of strange sobering effect. He rubbed an unsteady hand across his eyes, and he stammered, "What have I done? Honey, I've never heard you say any kind of curse word in my life before. What have I done?" He knelt down and pulled Mother and me—still holding the puppy—into his long arms and wept.

"It's late," she said weakly, "and tomorrow is a school day. Hunt, you must get to bed and get some sleep. Bob, go bury that puppy, and do it kindly."

"Please forgive me," Daddy whispered.

"Go, Bob," Mom repeated. "Go bury the puppy."

"No!" I said in a hoarse whisper.

"Come on, Son," Daddy said in the kindest voice I'd heard from him in a long time. "Come on, and I'll help you bury him," and he lifted me, still holding the dog, to my feet.

I silently looked into my father's face, and he looked so weary that I wanted to cry again, but I followed him out back to watch him dig a hole and wrap the pup in a towel and place him gently into the freshly dug hole. After the grave was covered, I let him carry me to my bed.

"I'm so sorry, Son. Please forgive me. Say you forgive your daddy."

I couldn't say a word, so I just turned my head away and he left me.

The next morning I saw a few of my friends at the junior high school. This was our first day at this building across town from the grammar school where I had gone for six years. New building and all new teachers for me. I was scared, but I wouldn't have admitted it to anybody. Not only was I unsure of myself in my new surroundings, but I was doing my best to cover up my "scars" from the night before. I was a "ticking time bomb" just waiting to be set off. I might have slept an hour or so last night, but I knew my parents didn't sleep a wink. At breakfast, I forced down a glass of milk and tried not to make eye contact with either of them. I do know my mother's eyes were swollen, and Daddy just looked at his plate. As I left the house, Mother kissed me, but she said nothing. I was glad to get away.

\* \* \*

As the half day of school progressed, I got lost only once. I was aware that others fared worse. By the time I got to my last period of the school day, just before noon on this first day, I entered Mr. Hamilton Ash's English class. I had not formed much of an opinion of the previous teachers. Each sort of seemed in a hurry to get such material covered that was required for this hurried first class of the new school year. However, with Mr. Ash, things turned out a little differently for me. He smiled during the whole short period, never seemed ill at ease or hurried. I looked right into his blue eyes, framed with friendly crinkles, and he seemed to smile a little more at me, or was it my imagination? At least, the friendly crinkles seemed to deepen a little more when he looked at me. When the final bell sounded for the day, and we passed out of his classroom, loaded with new, but brief, assignments from all our teachers for tomorrow, he stood at the door and, still smiling, touched each student on the shoulder as we went past him, and he was saying, in a warm voice, "See you tomorrow...bye...have a good afternoon...bye...tomorrow...bye..." until I was beyond the sound of his voice.

\* \* \*

I loitered all the way home, arriving an hour later than I should have. Mother had lunch ready because she knew I should be home within thirty minutes of the noon dismissal of the first day of school. She was sitting at the kitchen table with her hands to her face as I walked in.

"I expected you earlier," she said simply as she got up, with some physical effort, to put food on the table. "How was the first day?" she asked, attempting to sound normal.

"It was all right," I said, as I pushed the sandwich she placed before me across the plate to one side and picked up my spoon and tried to pick up an H in the bowl of soup. "I ain't hungry," I said absently.

"Darling, you have to eat something."

"Mother, why do we have to be different?" I asked without looking up.

"Different?" she asked quietly.

"You're sick....I can't have a pet...Daddy—"

"Son," she began before I could finish.

"It's my fault, *ain't* it?" I cut her off.

"Don't say *ain't*, Son," she said quietly without looking directly at me. Then, "Hunt, sometimes life isn't fair. I don't know why. I really don't know why. I'm sorry for your sake. I know things aren't easy for you. I hope—"

I turned my plate upside down as I jumped from my chair and ran from the room. I didn't get out the door before I heard her wail. The sound cut through me like a knife. I climbed high into the old red oak in the backyard and wept until I hurt all over.

Unmeasured time passed before I went into the house to find my mother lying on the couch in the living room. I crept as silently as I could across the room to touch her cheek as I said quietly, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Darling," she said in quiet composure as she sat up and drew me to her.

I was crying as I said, "I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry."

"No, you've done nothing to be sorry for," she said soothingly. "Don't apologize. I'm sorry I haven't been a better mother to you. And, my darling, it is not your fault. You have done nothing to bring any of this on any of us." She was smoothing my hair and kissing the side of my face. "Now stop crying. And, Hunt darling, whatever happens, you must never blame yourself. And you must always remember that your daddy and I love you. We've always loved you, and we always will. Circumstances make people do and say things that they don't mean." She shifted me somewhat in her arms so that she could look directly into my eyes. "I want you to understand something," she said more quietly now. "I may have to leave you one of these days, but it won't be because I didn't love you. I've always loved you so much. I want you to try hard and do well in school. Some day you'll be a man, and I want you to be a good man, a good husband and father."

"You're going to die, aren't you?" I asked as I looked into her eyes.

"Darling, we all have to die sometime. And I may have to leave you sooner than I would like."

"I don't want you to die, Mother," I said, and talking about it didn't hurt quite as bad as I had thought it would, but the tears came anyway.

She brushed at my tears and drew my face to her and kissed both my cheeks, saying quite calmly, "Remember, Darling, I love you with all my heart."

\* \* \*

As the hot days of September passed into warm nights of October, the days remained hot, but not as hot—time, and what went on inside of my time, was little more than oblivion to me. Of course, I went to school each

day, went to piano lessons three times each week and even played for my mother a piece or so on the old upright piano which was out of tune. I was just existing. Not really living. I went to school, but I was there in body, not really in mind. I got into trouble with three teachers: I sassed my math teacher and was sent to the principal's office promptly. I hit a boy in science class who made some remark about my hair. I don't remember what, just a remark, so I hit him. Mr. Brighton was a big teacher, and he lifted me off my feet from behind and said, "Hunt, can you explain why you hit Harold, or shall I let you explain why to the principal?" I couldn't explain why to Mr. Brighton or the principal, so I was put on probation. Two days later, when Mr. Ash, my favorite teacher, asked me why I didn't have my homework, I said rather off-handedly, "I don't know," and he kept me after school.

When we were alone, Mr. Ash said kindly, "Hunt, I've done some checking on you, and I find that you're an intelligent young man...." He waited and I said nothing but looked at the floor. I didn't mean to upset Mr. Ash. Some of the others I didn't really care, but Mr. Ash...

"Son, I found that your mother is having a hard time, and I wanted to say that I'm sorry. Your mom is an important person in your life. My mom was very important to me. I can only imagine that it is hard for you to concentrate on school work while worrying about her."

His kindness and understanding, even though I didn't understand at the time, really caught me off guard. He wasn't fussing at me; he was saying he understood. My head sank lower and I fought the tears that I could not control.

He put his hand on my shoulder and handed me his handkerchief. (I can remember that it smelled fresh like dew-wet grass in the early morning.) I tried to wipe my eyes, but by now I was shaking and I couldn't stop shaking or sobbing. Mr. Ash tightened his fingers on my shoulders and said softly, "It's all right, my boy. It's all right to cry."

I'll never know what made me do it, but I moved to put my arms around his neck, and his arms circled my shoulders.

"It's all right, Son. Go ahead and cry and it won't hurt so bad."

His voice was soft in my ear and I felt a soothing comfort creep slowly through my mind and body. He understood, I thought, what my life was like. He was the only person on earth to really understand. An eternity of silence passed between us before I pulled away from him. Momentarily I was embarrassed. I could remember what my daddy had said to me once when I fell and it hurt so bad that I cried: "Be a man. Men don't cry!" And he had said it harshly.

"I've got to go home," I said as I wiped at my eyes and nose.

"Can you wait a few minutes?" he said quite frankly, "and I'll drive you home."

I said nothing as I thought about what he had said. I would like to ride home with him. He was my favorite teacher, but what would my mother say? I knew Daddy wouldn't like it, but he wouldn't be home at this hour.

"I can leave in about five minutes," Mr. Ash said as he was stacking things on his desk in an orderly fashion. "If you don't mind, I'd like to speak to your mother. Would you care if I spoke with her?" He gathered a stack of papers and a book and put them into his briefcase.

"I guess not," I said, a little unsure.

"Come on," he said, as we walked toward the classroom door. He closed and locked it. "Do you have all your books that you need to take home with you?" This question, as were all the others, was kind

"Yes, sir," I said and followed him to the parking lot.

I told him where I lived, but he seemed already to know which way. A few minutes later I said, "The next house on the left."

He said as we got out of the car, "She's not expecting us, so let's go to the front door and knock."

I was going to take him to the back, but decided that his suggestion would be better.

"Mother!" I called as my teacher raised a fist to knock gently.

She opened the door and looked surprised, but before she could say anything, I said, "Mother, this is Mr. Ash that I was telling you about," and I couldn't help but smile a little.

As she opened the door for us to enter, Mr. Ash said, "I apologize, Mrs. Hews, for dropping by unannounced. May I come in? I can only stay a few minutes." When he was seated, he looked at me and said, "Hunt, would you get me a glass of water, please, and put some ice in it, if you don't mind."

"I can get it," my mother said, getting up.

"No, Ma'am, let Hunt get it," he said kindly, and I was off. Before I was out of hearing what was said, I did hear him say to her, "I wanted to say a word to you..."

It wasn't until years later that I realized that my teacher wished to say something about me to my mother: When I returned with the glass of ice water, Mr. Ash thanked me and drank. "Hunt," he said, "your mother tells me you play the piano quite well. Would you play something for me...if you feel up to it right now? I'd like to hear you."

I looked at her, and she was smiling at me. I had not seen her smile in a long time. "Well, yes, Sir," I said. My favorite teacher was asking me to play for him, and my mother was smiling. "I don't know many pieces by memory." I looked at him timidly and said, "Would you like to hear some of *Scheherazade*?"

"By Rimsky-Korsakov?" he asked, smiling broadly. "I'm impressed."

I looked at Mother, who was smiling even more, and I said, as I sat at the piano, "I only know the first movement from memory."

"Let's hear it," he said encouragingly.

I flexed my fingers and began to play the piece that I had worked on for so many lessons and practice hours, and for perhaps the first time I really enjoyed playing something that I would never openly admit that I liked. I looked at my teacher, who had a pleasantly surprised look on his face, and

was beaming. I felt relaxed, really relaxed, and I was proud that I knew how to play the piano—play this special piece.

When I had finished, I turned to face my audience and saw Mr. Ash rise to his feet and clap his hands loudly, saying “Bravo!” several times. My mother brushed at tears, but her smile was even brighter.

“Hunt, my boy,” my teacher was saying, “what a treat! You are good, and one day you will be *great* on the piano. Your mother is proud of you, Hunt. I’m proud of you. Sometime soon I want my wife to hear you play that same movement. She would love it.”

Mother came over and hugged me, and I didn’t mind Mr. Ash seeing her doing so.

“I must go now,” Mr. Ash said. “Thank you, Mrs. Hews, for welcoming me into your home, and, Hunt, thank you for the glass of water. It hit the spot, but thank you much more for the wonderful concert. I had no idea you had such talent....See you tomorrow at school.”

Mother saw him to the door.

\* \* \*

At school the next day I didn’t have as much trouble concentrating on what my teachers said. I looked forward to seeing Mr. Ash in last period.

“Hunt,” Mr. Ash said to me as I entered his room, “I forgot to bring my car keys in with me. Would you mind running out to the parking lot and getting them out of the ignition, please?”

I paused only briefly to see if I had heard right, and I ran all the way there and back. I was out of breath as I reentered the room, holding out the keys to him. He had finished checking the roll as he accepted the keys without looking at me, and as I hurried to my seat he started the class as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I wanted to think he was treating me specially, but he only glanced at me twice during the remainder of the class period. He called on almost everyone else in the class, and even though I raised my hand more than once, he called on someone else. I was disappointed until the bell rang and before I got out of the door, he called me.

“Hunt,” he said, “would you like to go home with me? I’d like for you to meet my wife. It’s all right with your mother. I asked her yesterday.” His usual smile played around his mouth and eyes.

I was surprised to say the least. “Yes, sir,” I said eagerly.

“Get everything you’re taking home with you and meet me at my car. I told your mother I’d bring you home by dinner time. Run along. I’ll be there soon.

\* \* \*

I had no idea where my teacher lived, and I didn’t ask when we were in his car and on our way. Just a few minutes later we were out of town, and then he pulled the car into a driveway of a rather ordinary looking house,

with the exception that it was gleaming white and the shutters and doors were a pale blue. He drove the car into a carport at the rear of the house, and even before I got out of the car I could see that the backyard sloped down to a lake. The grass was neatly mowed from shrubs that were against the back of the house, all the way to the water's edge. There were some white ducks that swam on the almost-calm surface of the water. Some cattails grew tall in the edge of the water not far away. And there was a spot of water lilies with pink blossoms poking up on slender stems through the shining, round, waxy-green flat pads that floated on the ripple-less water.

"Oh, you've got a lake, Mr. Ash!" I exclaimed excitedly.

"Not a lake really, just a pond," he answered with a smile.

"Oh, but it's big...and pretty. Can I go closer?"

"Sure. Come, and I'll walk down with you."

"Are there fish in there?" I wanted to know, forgetting everything else that had been on my mind all day long.

"Some, I think," he said, "but I rarely have time to fish, so I don't really know. Perhaps you and I can find out one of these days."

"Oh, could we? I'd like that. I've only been fishing once in my life. Daddy never has time to take me. Oh, look there's a frog on that lily pad."

"Looks sassy, doesn't he?" Mr. Ash said with a smile.

My teacher stood, with a hand on my shoulder, and said, "Let's go meet my wife. She's looking forward to meeting you, and she's expecting us."

I wanted to spend more time by the lake, but he said I could come back to fish another time.

I remember Mrs. Ash met us at the door. She was a small lady, with neat hair, dancing eyes and a smile that was as warm as spring sunshine. "Hello, Hunt," she said, and her voice was as warm as her smile." I've been looking forward to meeting you. Mr. Ash tells me you play the piano beautifully. Would you play something for me?"

"I guess so," I said, not being too sure of myself.

We were in the living room—the nicest and most spacious I've ever seen. Mrs. Ash led me to the huge, grand piano, and she pushed back a silken scarf and raised the top. And smilingly she stood back as I hesitated before sitting on the long polished bench.

"Play something short," Mr. Ash said with a smile, "because I think Mrs. Ash has something for us to eat in the kitchen."

Both were smiling as I ran a scale, a little slowly at first, then quickly. "I really don't know what to play," I said, a little embarrassed.

"Do you know any church hymns?" Mrs. Ash asked.

"Yes, Ma'am. I play them for my mom sometimes. Do you have a church book?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," she said as she produced a hymnal. "How about this?" she said, opening the book to "Onward Christian Soldiers."

"My mom likes that one, too," I said as I began to play.

Without any warning, both Mr. and Mrs. Ash began to sing the words softly, and they sounded so good that I almost missed a note.

"That's really nice," Mrs. Ash said as she hugged me to her. "And he's so young, Mr. Ash," she continued, looking at her husband. "Come, Darling," she said as she held my hand on our way to the kitchen. "Hunt, you have an unusual name—it's unique. Are you named after a special person?"

I wasn't sure what *unique* meant, but I liked her and whatever it meant must be O.K. "Yes, Ma'am, Hunt was my mother's name before she married my daddy. Her last name."

Mrs. Ash smiled even more and said, "That makes it even nicer. I like it."

I was about to say I like you, too, but we were in the kitchen, and she was showing me where to sit at the table. She set glasses of cold lemonade, with leaves of mint sticking up from the floating ice, before Mr. Ash and me before she joined us.

I had to ask what the little dark green leaves were. When told to stir the mint with the drink and I tasted, I smiled genuinely. "That's good," I said.

Then a plate of cookies was set on the table and all three of us ate. I didn't know if I should eat more than one, but I wanted more. Then, as if Mrs. Ash could read my mind, "Hunt, you eat all you want. They're easy to bake, and I love to bake them, especially when I see someone enjoying them."

I know I ate too many, but I felt so free in doing so that I enjoyed them anyway.

\* \* \*

After Mr. Ash reassured me that my mother knew I would be home later, I was doing my homework as Mr. Ash marked some papers. And, to my surprise, Mrs. Ash was in the living room playing the piano. When I thought about it later, I knew I should not have been surprised. There had been sheet music stacked on the piano, but I had paid little attention.

When the telephone rang, I heard it, but continued my math homework. But when Mrs. Ash came into the room where Mr. Ash and I were, after she had spoken on the phone, I looked at her face and saw the serious concern.

"Mr. Ash," she said, quietly, "Hunt's mother is being kept at the hospital for observation after her treatment this afternoon. Hunt, darling, get your things together. Mr. Ash and I will take you to her now."

I knew today was her treatment day, but I assumed that she would return home afterward as usual. I couldn't think for a long minute. Finally, I said, "But she always goes home afterward. Why not today?...She's going to die," I said matter-of-factly.

"We don't know that, Son," Mr. Ash said as he got up and came to me. "Here, let me help you get your books and papers together. We'll go now. Your father will be there."

"How will Daddy know?" I asked innocently, still not being able fully to grasp the seriousness of the situation.

"They will have gotten in touch with him," Mr. Ash said. He had his arm around my shoulders as the three of us made our way to the car.

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At the hospital, Mr. and Mrs. Ash ushered me through the quiet corridors until we were at a door with a neat sign: NO VISITORS, PLEASE.

Before Mr. Ash could knock gently, I began to whimper. I feared my mother was dying, and I didn't know what to do, what to say.

Immediately, Mrs. Ash's arms were around me, and she was whispering into my hair, "Shhhh. Hunt, darling, you don't want your mother to see you upset. That's it, take your time. Breathe deeply, through your mouth. That's it. You're doing fine." She smoothed my hair lovingly. "Now," she handed me a handkerchief and said kindly, "Blow your nose." I did and then wiped my eyes.

"You're doing fine, Son," Mr. Ash said. "Now, are you ready to go in. Your mother is expecting you."

On entering the room, the first thing I saw was my mother, lying still and quiet, and she was so white, paler than I had ever seen her before. Mrs. Ash went with me to the bed, and Mr. Ash made his way to my daddy, who was sprawled in a big chair near a window, and even before I had time to say a word to my mother, I knew he had been drinking. He tried to straighten up as Mr. Ash held out his hand to him and introduced himself.

"Mother," I said, shaking all over.

"Son, darling," she tried to smile. "I'm sorry I didn't make it home. She laid a weak hand on my head and let her fingers caress my cheek. To Mrs. Ash she said, "I know you're Mrs. Ash, and I'm glad Hunt was at your house. I had a talk with Mr. Ash when he brought Hunt home, and I can't tell you how grateful I am for the interest he has taken in my son. Thank you for seeing about Hunt." Her hand dropped away from my face.

Mrs. Ash pulled a chair next to the bed and said softly, "Hunt, you sit here with your mother and hold her hand while I go meet your father."

By now, I could smell the familiar smell of liquor that drifted across the small room. I heard Daddy say, "My wife's not well, and it's hard on me and the boy."

Her fingers pressed lightly against the palm of my hand, as I held it, and she said as boldly as she could, "Bob, we'll make it...Don't worry these nice people with our problems."

"That's easy for you to say," he said, still trying to get comfortable in the huge chair. It was as if he had little control over his movements.

"I'm sure you'll make it, Mr. Hews," Mrs. Ash said kindly, obviously knowing my daddy's condition and trying to avoid any more unkind talk.

"Mr. Hews," Mr. Ash said, "let's walk outside and...get some fresh air."

"You think I've had too much to drink, don't you?" he said, wiggling to his feet. "Yeah, I could use some air."

"Take your time," Mrs. Ash said as the two men left the room, "Hunt and I'll stay awhile."

After I was assured by Mrs. Ash, my mother and the doctor that she wasn't going to die that night, I agreed to go home with Daddy. I really didn't want to, but I went. Soon after we arrived home, Mr. and Mrs. Ash came by with warm food for a late supper, and Daddy and I would have enough left over for another meal, too.

The next morning Daddy said, "Hunt, I guess your friends mean well, but I don't like them interfering. We'll get through this by ourselves."

For some reason, Mr. Ash picked me up in his car the next morning and took me to school with him, after we had stopped briefly by the hospital to see Mother. She looked better and she sounded stronger.

"You be a good boy, Son, and do what Mr. and Mrs. Ash tell you," she said as we left. "If I don't go home this afternoon, it'll be all right for you to spend the night with them tonight. I'll be home soon."

"But, you have to come home," I said pleadingly without thinking.

"I'll be home soon, Son. You be good. Do your homework."

That day was really long, and so were the next three. Each afternoon, either Mr. or Mrs. Ash would take me to the hospital to see my mother and then take me home with them. I'd do my homework, after a snack, and later we'd go back to the hospital, then back to their house. Mrs. Ash always had a good meal for supper. I tried to watch TV with them, but my mind just wasn't into it. Once, I saw Daddy at the hospital, and he was not himself. He had been drinking too much, and his behavior was anything but nice. He finally said, "Boy, you got to come home and help out. I need you."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Ash tried to reason that I'd be better off with them, and he could spend more time with his wife, but to no avail. So back home I went.

As the weeks passed, Mother did come home from the hospital because my father's limited family health insurance ran out and would pay no more. I remained home some days in order to help out because she was weak and sickly. Daddy stayed out later and later, not coming home at all some nights. Mother was desperate for money to buy food and pay bills. She sold a piece of furniture from the living room, then another. One day there was nothing left in that room except the piano. I kind of hoped she would sell it; then I would have a solid reason for not going to piano lessons and that practice in the afternoons.

The Ashes, both of them, did all they could for my mother and me, but their hands were tied because of my father who cursed my mother, saying, "We don't need their charity."

On a Monday afternoon of the first week of November that year I arrived home from school to find Mother on the floor of the kitchen. I was so scared that I couldn't think of anything to do except call Mr. Ash. He wasn't home from school yet, but Mrs. Ash would try to call him, saying to me, "Hunt, I'll call an ambulance, and I'll be right over. Darling, be as calm as you can. I'll be right there."

Mrs. Ash got there just as the ambulance came to a screaming halt, and the men hurried inside and very quickly they had my mother in the ambulance and were on their way. Mrs. Ash and I followed closely behind.

Mr. Ash met us at the ER, and I was glad to see him because his wife had begun to tremble, and now I saw that she was on one side crying silently.

"Is she going to die?" I whispered frantically to Mr. Ash.

"Son," he said kindly, with an arm around me, "they'll do all they can."

I hugged him tightly, hoping she would live.

My mother revived and asked for me. She looked so white and almost lifeless, I remember.

"Hunt, darling," she began, "I may have to leave you sooner than I hoped, but I want you to promise me you'll study hard, keep up your piano lessons...and practice..." Her voice drifted away, and I feared she was dead, even though I knew nothing about death. Again she roused and breathed deeply as she tried to pull the oxygen tube away. "Darling, I love you," she said, and the doctor and nurses crowded around, and the doctor asked Mr. Ash to take me outside.

Mrs. Ash joined us, and she hugged me. "Darling," she said, "let's walk around the corner to the waiting area, and we can sit down."

I didn't know what to do. I was unsure of what to say or do and I was uncomfortable because I needed to go to the rest room. "Mr. Ash, would it be all right if I go to the rest room?"

"Sure, Son, just down the hall. See the sign." He said. "We'll be right here. Go ahead."

A few minutes later when I came out of the rest room, Mrs. Ash was there waiting for me. "Come, Darling, the doctor wants us to come back into the room where your mother is."

I almost ran, with Mrs. Ash close behind. Mr. Ash was in the room, and as I rushed in, he caught me to him. "Son, your mother is gone..."

"What do you mean—" I stammered, unable to comprehend.

Mrs. Ash was holding my hand and said quietly, "Do you want to say something to her, Dear? If you don't, it's all right."

I knew she was going to die, but, somehow, I just didn't expect her to, not now. I thought she'd continue the way she was until...I don't know for sure what I thought, but she couldn't be dead. I moved to be free of Mr. Ash's arms and went to the bedside. The doctor and two nurses waited as they reached out to me. "I'm sorry, Son, the doctor said, "we did all we could."

A nurse touched my cheek and said, "I'm sorry, Darling. Do you want to say something to her?"

"Anything...if you want to," Mrs. Ash said, still holding my hand.

"I don't know what to say," I said and my voice broke. I put a hand on my mother's face and my body went limp. I didn't seem to have any control.

Mr. Ash, I remember, gathered me into his arms and said, "We'll go find your father," as he carried me from the room.

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Daddy had not come home by the time the Ashes had driven me there. Mr. Ash left a note for him, telling him of my mother's death and that I'd be with them. The note urged him to call the Ashes.

I remember it was an extremely warm night for November. Mrs. Ash, as soon as we reached their house, said, "I'll get us something to eat. Hunt needs his strength, and we all need food."

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"Let's sit out here on the back steps, Hunt, while Mrs. Ash gets some food ready," Mr. Ash said.

Silently, I dropped to the topmost step and put my hands over my face. I didn't know what to say or do. I didn't want to cry any more, but I feared the tears would come anyway.

Mr. Ash sat tightly against me and said, "I remember when I lost my mother, and it was hard. I was a grown man, and I didn't know what to say...what to do..."

I removed my hands from my face and looked at him. "You felt that way, too?"

"I suspect everybody does," he said.

"I don't really understand death," I said.

"I think life is a mystery sometimes, and at times, I think death is a mystery. There are laws and reasons, of course, but I think we're all a little confused about those things at times, especially in our times of loss."

I was glad Mr. Ash was talking to me about this. What he said didn't really make much sense, but he was talking, not trying to change the subject.

"What will happen to my mother now that she's dead?" I ask simply.

"When we get in touch with your father, he'll make arrangements to bury her body, but, Son, your mother was a Christian, and she believed—all Christians believe—that her soul will go to Heaven. You've been told about Heaven in church and Sunday school. A place where she'll be free from pain and be happy...and at rest."

I thought about that, but before I could say anything I noticed, as I gazed across the grassy slope to the lake, a tiny light blinked on-and-off, on-and-off about three or four feet from the ground.

Night had fallen slowly as we silently sat there, Mr. Ash and I, but now it was as though we sat under a dark blanket. The stars seemed especially dim as they waited for the full moon to show its face. Then, as if by some magic, I saw another tiny light blinking on-and-off, on-and-off. A minute or so passed and there were several, then many tiny blinking lights.

"What—" I started, more in amazement than in fright.

"Lightning bugs," Mr. Ash said quietly. "Fireflies. You haven't seen a firefly before?" he asked gently.

"No, but I remember reading a poem about them once. I think it was by Kipling."

"Fireflies on Parade," he said. "Just sit quietly for a minute," he continued, "and I'll show you something my grandmother showed me when I was a boy...when I first saw a firefly on a night much like this. I'll be back shortly."

Within a couple of minutes he had gone into the kitchen, where his wife prepared food, and emerged with two empty pint fruit jars. He

removed the lid from one and handed both the lid and the jar to me as he unscrewed the lid from the other.

"Follow me," he said as he led the way down the steps onto the grass, and then we were in the midst of blinking fireflies. With little effort he lifted his jar up quickly, directly under one of the little insects, and before I could exclaim my amazement, he had a blinking bug inside the jar. He clapped the lid on swiftly. "Try it," he said.

Almost immediately I realized that the little insects were slow on the wing, and I had one in my jar. Mr. Ash caught another one, then another, as I added to my number in my jar.

"Let's go to the porch and see how many we've captured," he said lightly.

"How can we count them?" I asked, trying to see how many I had, "they won't be still, and they're blinking as they fly around inside the jar."

"We'll let them go one at a time, and that way we can count them," he suggested.

Momentarily I wanted to keep mine. "Could we feed them? Would they stay alive?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know what to feed them," he said as he released one bug at a time, counting out loud.

"What makes them light up?" I asked, for the first time really thinking about it.

"I don't really know. Good question to ask your science teacher," he suggested.

"He's an old grouch," I said under my breath.

"I don't think he's so bad," Mr. Ash said soothingly. "Perhaps you just haven't gotten to know him very well."

"I think they're pretty," I said, indicating the fireflies. "Do they live very long?"

"I don't know what their life span is. Not very long, I wouldn't think," he answered as he let the last one go from his jar.

There was a period of silence between us as we sat quietly, still watching the fireflies in concert. Then I was thinking about my mother. "Mr. Ash, why do some people have to die before others? I wish I could've died before my mother."

Mr. Ash, seeming to understand my thoughts and feelings said nothing, but he put his arm around my shoulders and drew me to him. I felt a warmth flow over me, and I was glad he held me. But there was tightness in my chest that I could not explain, then or now, and I felt tears sting my eyes. I struggled to hold back the sobs, but I sobbed anyway.

"It's all right, Son," he whispered in my hair as he held me tightly. I let my arms creep around him, trying with all my being to control my sobs, but I couldn't. "It's all right, Son, it's all right. Go ahead and cry. You loved your mother, and it's only natural for you to grieve....It's all right." And I clung to him in my anguish.

I would not have made it through the seventh grade had it not been for Mr. and Mrs. Ash and their gentle pushing and endless patience. As soon as my mother was buried I made up my mind that I was not going back to school. I didn't need an education. I could read and write. What more did I need? I'd get a job of some kind. I spoke to Daddy about my decision, and he didn't have much to say because he was sleepy from too much alcohol consumption, which was his case most of the time those days. He did say, "I don't care what you do." Then, as what seemed an afterthought, he added, "But you're going to have to help out more around the house. Mop the kitchen floor, warm up some food, and you can do the laundry, can't you?"

Being so glad of his ready and willing agreement in not insisting on my going back to school, I didn't give much thought to what the school officials, the social services people, the law, and certainly not to what Mr. and Mrs. Ash would have to say about the matter, that I quickly said, "I can do that and more." I had things going my way at the moment.

However, after three days of not going to school, but promising Mr. Ash each afternoon when he and his wife showed up at my house, promptly at five P.M., bringing enough food for Daddy and me to have for supper, breakfast and my lunch the next day, that I'd be at school the next morning, Mr. Ash had a long talk with me. I sat politely and listened to him, as Mrs. Ash sat next to me, holding my hand, and I sort of enjoyed her holding my hand. I liked her and I liked Mr. Ash, but...

"Son," Mr. Ash said sternly, "you've promised me for three afternoons that you'd be at school the next day. You haven't kept your word. I'll make it easier for you tomorrow. I'll pick you up promptly at 7:45. Can you get up in time by yourself, or do you want me to call you at six or 6:30? Now, I understand that it's hard for you with your mother gone, but you know she wanted you to go to school and get an education. I know you well enough to know that you would not want to disappoint her." He looked at me, and continued, "Would you? She loved you, Hunt."

With Mrs. Ash putting a little pressure on my hand, I dropped my eyes that had filled with tears and said quietly, "No, I don't want to disappoint her. I've got an alarm clock. I'll be ready in the morning."

Mr. Ash squeezed my shoulder as his wife hugged me and kissed my cheek. This treatment reminded me a little of my mother's actions.

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The next morning, and the next until Christmas holidays, Mr. Ash was in front of my house on school morning promptly at 7:45, and I was ready. Not exactly eager, but as time went on I didn't mind quite as much. And it was a treat having Mr. Ash pick me up and take me to school each morning. Daddy protested mildly at first about this arrangement, but as the mornings passed and I was getting his breakfast on the table by the time he was up and dressed for work, the protests grew weaker and finally stopped.

I thought I was finished with the piano lessons when I came home

from school on a Friday afternoon and found the piano gone from the now-empty living room. Daddy had sold it. He was not there when I arrived, and he came in so late that night that I was already asleep, and the next morning he had such a hangover that he didn't get up until noon. I said nothing about the absent piano. I didn't care all that much, even though I did enjoy playing a few pieces from time to time. But on Monday morning, not giving it much forethought, I said to Mr. Ash, "I guess I won't have to go to piano lessons anymore. Daddy sold our piano last Friday."

"Won't you miss it?" he wanted to know casually.

"A little, I guess."

"Your mother wanted you to play well, you know, and she was so proud of how well you already play. You remember?"

How could I not remember? I was silent for a short time and then, "I remember," I said quietly.

"Tell you what," he said, tapping me on the knee as we rode toward school, "why don't you go home with me this afternoon, and let's speak with Mrs. Ash about it. She loves the piano like your mother did. How about it?"

That afternoon, when we went into the kitchen at Mr. Ash's, I smelled cookies, just out of the oven. Oh, they did smell good. And hot chocolate.

"I knew you men would be hungry on this chilly afternoon," Mrs. Ash said as she kissed Mr. Ash and hugged me to her. "Come and sit down at the table," she said as she ushered me to a chair.

I ate the warm cookies too quickly and gulped the chocolate.

"Take your time," Mrs. Ash said, smilingly. "You don't have to hurry. There are plenty, and you can take some home with you later...for you and your father."

"He's always late," I said without thinking, and I was sorry I had said it. I didn't want my teacher to know things were not so good at my house. "The cookies are good. I like them warm."

"Hunt," Mrs. Ash said, seeming to know that I was a little embarrassed about saying that Daddy was always late getting home, "will you play me something on the piano before you go home?"

"Yes, Ma'am." I didn't mind playing; in fact, I rather enjoyed playing for someone who seemed appreciative the way the Ashes were, especially Mrs. Ash. And both were good to me, always good to me. Many times I had wanted to say something, or do something, to try to show them that I was grateful, but I didn't quite know what to say or do. I did say "thank you" at times, but that didn't seem enough. "What would you like for me to play?"

I haven't heard you play the first movement of *Scheherazade*. I'd love to hear that."

Later, when I had played the requested piece, I hastened to say, "I didn't play that as well as I can. I'm sorry. I haven't practiced lately."

"Mr. Ash told me on the phone that you no longer have a piano. Would you like to come here and practice on mine? I'd love to have you, and I'd

enjoy hearing you practicing.” She had her hands on my shoulders, and her voice was so kind that I agreed before I had time to think.

“You can come home with Mr. Ash after school, and either he or I will drive you home later. And, Hunt, dear, I’m glad you’re coming,” she added.

And so my piano lessons continued three days each week, and I went to Mr. Ash’s house to practice. This arrangement turned out better for me than I had expected at first. Mrs. Ash’s piano was in tune, and even I could tell the difference in a battered, cheap, old upright piano that had never been tuned and a grand that had been kept in tune all its life. And, too, I began to enjoy my practice sessions, with Mrs. Ash’s continual praise. She reminded me of my mother more and more, even with her cooking. Thinking back, I now know that she was doing everything in her power to please me and keep me interested. And, Mr. Ash could make me feel relaxed as I did my homework after practice.

There were a few times that I mildly rebelled—as I think back—about doing certain homework assignments for other teachers, but Mr. Ash would reason with me in such a way that I just couldn’t disappoint him... or Mrs. Ash.

Christmas vacation was on me before I realized it. I had not given any thought to the fact that Daddy and I had no close relatives, and the few distant ones that remained from either side of the family were scattered and, in most cases, faraway. Mother had always managed Christmas so that it didn’t matter if it were just the three of us. And I had never thought about having a large gathering for the holidays, any holiday for that matter. But, Christmas was on us, and we didn’t even have a tree. Mother always took care of all that, and even though I looked forward to helping her trim the tree, I had no idea where she got our tree each year. I spoke with Daddy about a tree the day before we were to be out of school for the holidays.

He was less than enthusiastic, showing no interest, I thought, and when I insisted that I wanted a tree, he said off-handedly, “Wd don’t need a tree. We ain’t even got presents. Your mom always did that stuff.”

Well, where did she get our tree every year? I asked with growing concern.

“I don’t know. I think she bought it from the corner somewhere around here. Anyway, we don’t have the money to be throwing away on Christmas trees.”

“What’re we going to have to eat for Christmas dinner?” I had not thought about that either.

“Kid, we’ve got more important things to think about than Christmas stuff.” He showed no interest whatsoever.

“We have to have something for Christmas dinner that’s about Christmas. You know, turkey and dressing and things like that.”

“We’ll eat at a restaurant that day. They’ll have something.” He was walking away from me and away from the subject altogether.

The last day at school before the holidays we had very little teaching and learning; instead, each class had refreshments in a festively decorated room, and some teachers gave out candy or small, inexpensive gifts that we could take home with us. We sang songs, and some teachers read Christmas stories or poems, and we were allowed more freedom than usual. All of this made me want to have something at home that would look Christmassy, remind me of years when Mother was alive. The closer to the end of the shortened school day the more concerned I became, and by the time of last period with Mr. Ash, I was sad.

Mr. Ash's classroom was decorated, and he even had a tree—only one other teacher had one in her room. He handed out cookies that his wife had made, plus some candy that he had bought, and he had each of us a brightly wrapped gift. I knew Mrs. Ash had helped him. At the end of his class period, everyone was rushing to get home, but I lingered. I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't know what, exactly, to say, or how to say it. I had the Christmas Spirit, and I longed to tell him how much I appreciated him. I just couldn't think of how to begin.

"Hunt, are you in a terrible hurry to get home?" he asked as he was taking down a Christmas bulletin board that must be put away before leaving for the holidays.

"No, Sir," I said.

"I wondered if you'd help me take this tree down. If you have time, that is. I could use a little help. All the Christmas things must be put away or out of the room so that the rooms can be cleaned properly over the holidays."

I began to take ornaments off the tree and put them on the table as Mr. Ash wrapped them in soft paper and put them in a box. "I'm not in any hurry," I said, without any emotion that I was clearly feeling. And before I realized what I was saying, "We don't have a tree yet. I hope to get one soon. Mother always did that."

"I was going to put this tree in the hallway for the custodian to take out. I think they just burn them. Could you use this one, and they wouldn't have to bother with it." He was busy with the ornaments and never looked at me.

I couldn't suppress the smile that rose from my heart to my face. "If it's just going to be thrown away, yes, Sir, I would like to have it. I might could get my daddy to come get it." But even as I said this, I had my doubts.

"Tell you what..." he said slowly as he wrapped the last red glass ball, "I'll take it home for you. You've helped me, and now I'll help you. How's that?" he smiled warmly at me.

"Oh, yes, Sir," and there was pure joy in my voice.

"Could you use these ornaments? You could borrow them, if you like."

"We've got lots of stuff to decorate with at home, things my mother always used.

"I'm almost ready to leave here...would you mind going home with me before we take the tree to your house? Mrs. Ash asked me to bring you by if you had time." He always seemed so considerate of me.

"Yes, Sir, I've got time," but I wanted to hurry home with the tree. I wanted Daddy to see it. Maybe he would help me put the trimmings on it.

At Mr. Ash's house Mrs. Ash had cookies and hot chocolate. By the time we started for my house, a light rain had begun to fall. But nothing could dampen my spirits now. I had a tree. My worries about that were over. Mrs. Ash insisted on going with us, and I certainly didn't mind. I always felt good with her.

Mr. Ash helped me get the tree into our living room. I was a little embarrassed because there was no furniture in there, but he helped me set the tree into the holder, and Mrs. Ash said she'd help me with the decorations, if I wanted her to, and since that would be faster, I agreed. After I found the boxes of balls, bells and tinsel that Mom had packed away, Mr. Ash handed things to me and his wife, and we hung them on the branches of the nicely shaped tree that was now mine. I was overjoyed. At the time I didn't think about presents, or that there weren't any, and probably wouldn't be any, but at least, I'd have a decorated tree. It would be Christmas after all.

Five P.M. came. Six. Still, Daddy didn't come home, and Mr. and Mrs. Ash said they'd wait until he came in before they went home. I wanted him to come, but I feared he'd come in drunk. I hoped he wouldn't be "sick" in front of my teacher and his wife. That would just be too much.

"It's seven o'clock," Mr. Ash said, "Son, you write a note and tell your father that you'll be at our house. If he comes home before your bedtime, he can call us, and we'll bring you back home. If he's delayed too late, you can spend the night with us." I knew that they knew he came in awfully late some nights, and some nights not at all. I didn't want to leave my Christmas tree, but I didn't want to cause Mr. Ash to worry either, and I knew both he and his wife would.

So I wrote a note and put it on the kitchen table.

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Mrs. Ash invited Daddy and me over for Christmas dinner, but Daddy made excuses, and even though I would like to have eaten with them I feared Daddy would be drinking and would not be nice, so I resigned myself to being home with him alone. I managed to buy him a couple of gifts—small and inexpensive, but they were presents, and I did try. I wrapped them awkwardly and put them under the tree Christmas Eve morning. Whereas they were the only packages under the tree, and other Christmases there had been several, mostly for me, a few for Daddy and one or two for Mother, I tried not to think about past years, but it was hard.

Since Daddy didn't go to work that morning, he slept. I wished he'd get up since it was Christmas Eve, but I didn't dare wake him for fear of what he'd say or do. I knew he missed Mother, but why did he have to show it the way he did, being so sullen, drinking more than usual. (There had been a time before Mom got so sick when he didn't drink so much—just on Saturday nights, mostly.)

About ten A.M. Mrs. Ash called to say she was bringing over some food for us to have Christmas Day. I was elated because I knew whatever she brought would be delicious, and we could have Christmas dinner at home. Then, I thought about Daddy, and how grouchy he could be in the mornings. I hoped he wouldn't wake up until after she had gone. I felt lucky when she came, and I helped her bring a lot of covered dishes into the kitchen, and she gave instructions as to which went into the refrigerator and which ones should be warmed tomorrow before eating etc. The last things she brought in were three brightly wrapped gifts. One for Daddy and two for me. They were pretty under the tree, and I was dying with curiosity to know what was in mine. And what in the world would they give Daddy? I hoped he would accept it nicely, whatever it was.

It was difficult for me to stay in bed after I woke at five on Christmas morning, but I managed to stay until six. I wished Daddy would wake up, but even if he did I doubted that he would get up. (I guess Christmas was hard for him, too, without Mother.) I made breakfast, warming up sausages and biscuits that Mrs. Ash had brought over the day before. And there were jams and jellies that I had never tasted before, all delicious. I think the brewing pot of coffee, plus the fragrance of warm and different foods drifted into Daddy's room, and he got up. I smiled to myself when he walked slowly into the kitchen to the breakfast I had on the table.

"Son, where did you get all this stuff?" he asked almost good-naturedly.

"Mrs. Ash brought it yesterday."

"It was nice of her, but she shouldn't have. We don't need all this stuff," he said in surprisingly good humor as he ate hungrily.

"Daddy, can we hurry and open our presents?" We had always eaten breakfast on Christmas morning before opening gifts, but when Mother was alive we always got up earlier and ate earlier.

"Son," he said, almost kindly, "I'm sorry your mom ain't here. Christmas ain't going to be the same, but you know that. I didn't know what to get you. Your mom always tended to that, but there are some things here for you that she got before she died."

I wasn't expecting this, and I became more excited. "Where are they?" I asked, trying not to appear too eager.

"In my closet.... You go on and start opening what you have under the tree while I get them."

My Christmas that year wasn't as lean and bleak as it had appeared earlier. Mother had managed to buy and wrap quite a few things for me, and for Daddy, before she got so sick. There were the usual socks, underwear, shirts, jeans, a sweater as well as some games which I had wanted. And from the Ashes there were some more games, another shirt and sweater for me, and a gift certificate for Daddy, all wrapped gaily. Daddy was surprised, but he accepted his gift without too much protestation, and I was glad. There was one last envelope, tied with a huge, red bow and ribbon that I had thought was a Christmas card, but when I opened it last,

there was a note: *Hunt, look on the front porch. From Santa.* I was baffled for a brief moment, and then I read the note to Daddy.

He looked blank, but said, "Well, go look."

I could tell that he knew nothing about whatever it was that had become a mysterious surprise so suddenly and abruptly. I half-stumbled, half-ran to the front door and flung it open, and as I stepped onto the porch, there was a new bicycle, with an enormous bow tied to the handle bars. I was sure Daddy knew nothing about it. So where did it come from? The Ashes? Immediately, I suspected they had put it there. But why would they spend so much money on me? They had already done so much.

When Daddy saw it, he said right away, "If that's from the Ashes, it has to go back. We can't accept that kind of gift from them. They've already done too much. Sorry, but you'll have to tell them."

I could see that he was extremely serious. "Maybe they didn't," I began. I wanted the bicycle. I had wanted one for years, but Mother always explained that we couldn't afford one.

"You have to call them now," he said sternly. "I'm sorry, Hunt, but you can't keep an expensive present like that. Call them."

I fought back the tears as I made the call. I asked Mrs. Ash about the bike, but she said they didn't buy it. I told her what Daddy was saying, and she asked to speak to him. After a short conversation with Mrs. Ash, Daddy hung up the phone.

"She says some of your mother's friends got together and bought the bike...so I guess you can keep it. I told her it makes me look bad that I can't afford to buy you a bike, but she did say that your mother wanted you to have one, and her friends knew it, and they wanted to honor her wish. So, I guess you can keep it. You do need to find out who these people are and thank them, I guess."

"Can I ride it now?" I asked excitedly.

"Sure. Go on."

As I rode around the block on my new bike, wearing a new shirt and jeans, with the new sweater the Ashes gave me, I was happier than I had been since my mother died. That's not to say I was all that happy, but things were better.

So, Christmas of 1955 passed. Daddy was better to me during the holidays than he had been, and he drank very little compared to what his previous consumption had been. I would ride my bike to school from now on, and I would continue to go to Mrs. Ash's to practice piano lessons.

I spoke of my new bike to the Ashes a time or so, but they didn't make much of it, and somehow, as time went on and I thought more about where it had actually come from, I suspected more and more that those two were the real givers of the bicycle that I treasured more and more as the school wore down to its final days in May.

The week after school was out, Mr. Ash talked with me about getting a paper route now that I had my own bike. I hadn't thought of it, but as soon as he mentioned it I was all for it. I could make some money. I'd have spending money without having to ask Daddy. Yes, it was a wonderful idea, having my own money, especially since Daddy rarely gave me any anyway.

Not long after I started my afternoon paper route, I was over at the Ashes, practicing piano, and Mr. Ash was out in his yard mowing the grass. As soon as I finished with my piano time, I went out to join him. He stopped for a drink of water, and I asked if I could mow some. I'd never pushed a power mower before, but with Mr. Ash's patient instructions, I was soon cutting a straight swath.

"Hunt, my boy, you're a natural," he said when I had finished the section he had designated for me to mow.

"This is fun, Mr. Hunt," I said, thinking all the while I was mowing that if I had a mower, I could hire out to my neighbors to cut their grass and make even more money. After a moment of thought, I said, "Mr. Ash, do you think I could make enough money to buy my own mower?" I had no idea how much one would cost.

Mrs. Ash brought fresh glasses of lemonade for each of us, saying, "That's hot work. Thought you men could use these," as she handed a glass to each of us. (I always liked the way she referred to Mr. Ash and me as men.)

"Son," Mr. Ash said and placed a hand on my knee as we sat on the back steps, looking down across the pond where the ducks swam leisurely, "I suspect," he continued, "you could borrow enough money from the bank to buy a mower if I went with you. We'd have to sign some papers agreeing that you would pay them back so much per week, and they would add some interest onto the loan. If you're serious about this, I think it's a really good idea. Do you know what interest is?"

"Kind of. We've had some problems in math class about that."

"You have to be serious and willing to work regularly because you couldn't miss payments."

"I'm serious, Mr. Ash. Would you go with me to the bank?"

"Yes, I think you are, Hunt, and, yes, I'll go with you to the bank. We'll go tomorrow."

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I had never been in a bank before, and I think I would have been scared to walk up to anyone that I saw sitting at desks if Mr. Ash had not been with me. He put a hand behind my shoulder and gently ushered me along beside him as he walked right up to a lady sitting behind a desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Ash," the lady said, offering her hand in a friendly gesture.

"How are you today, Miss Goodsey?" he smiled at her, as he offered his hand. "This is my young friend, Hunt Hews, and he wishes to speak with you about a loan."

I'll never forget how she smiled at me as she held out her hand to me. "Good morning, Hunt. You've come to the right place for a loan."

I remember that I felt easy right away. Mr. Ash had told me what to say before we went inside the bank, and I spoke up without hesitation. She listened patiently, and then she told me about interest rates, weekly payments, what the total amount that I would be paying overall, and that my payments would have to be on time, or there would be a penalty fee etc.

"Do you think you can make these payments on time?" she asked nicely, with a quiet smile.

"Yes, Ma'am," and I couldn't help but smile back.

After some more questions and answers, she showed me where to sign my name three different places on two different forms. I looked at Mr. Ash, and he nodded and smiled, and after I had signed, then she passed the papers over to Mr. Ash for him to sign. Within a brief time I was armed with enough money in my new checking account to buy a new lawn mower; plus, I had deposited a small amount of the money I'd made from my paper route in the new account. On leaving the bank, I looked at Mr. Ash, and I felt important, but I still needed help in buying a mower.

"Mr. Ash, if you have time, would you mind going with me to buy a mower?"

Before that afternoon had passed I had a new power mower, a can of gasoline, a quart of oil, and Mr. Ash had helped me get the new machine going. He watched me as I knocked on my next-door neighbor's door and asked her if I could mow her yard. I saw him smiling as she asked me how much I would charge, and I told her she could pay me whatever she thought it was worth when I had finished. He watched as I made several rounds, and then he went home, saying as he left, "Hunt, call me tonight before you go to bed and let me know how your first day of being in business for yourself went," and he was smiling as he drove away.

Before it got too dark for me to see I had mowed three lawns on my block, and each time I was paid more than I would have charged. And I was asked if I would mow the yards again next week.

I was tired and hot when I called Mr. Ash, and he sounded pleased when he said, "Son, I'm proud of you. Do you want me to drive you to the bank in the morning to deposit your earnings?"

"Yes, Sir... Mr. Ash, do you think I could use this money to make two payments at the same time? Or will I have to wait until the payment dates come?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Son, and we'll ask at the bank in the morning. I'm proud of you, Hunt. See you in the morning around nine."

\* \* \*

Before August was half over and it was almost time to start eighth grade, I had mowing jobs almost every morning and afternoon. I would have given up my paper route, but after talking with Mr. Ash, he suggested I keep it because I could continue to deliver papers after grass-mowing

season was over, and I agreed. The day before school started I paid my final payment on my loan at the bank, months ahead of the due dates, and Miss Goodsey, smiling, asked, "Could I loan you some more money?"

"No, Ma'am, not today," and I had more confidence in myself than I'd ever had before. I owned a mower that was still in good condition, and I had money in the bank. At Mr. Ash's suggestion I not only had a checking account, but I also had started a savings account. It felt good to have my own money—money that I had earned. Now I could buy a Coke and a candy bar without having to ask for the money.

Looking back on that summer, I'm not sure how I did all the things I did: I mowed yards, delivered afternoon papers, went to Little League practice and games, kept up my piano lessons and practice and still had time to spend a little time with friends at the Dairy Queen on Saturday afternoons each week for a Coke and burger. Sure, I was tired at bedtime, but I always felt good about things, no matter how late Daddy came in at night. And I woke up each morning ready to go again. I had a purpose in life, even though I really wasn't aware of it then.

## TWO

When I did start eighth grade, I was disappointed that I couldn't be in Mr. Ash's English class again, but he taught only seventh and ninth grade classes. Maybe next year. However, I did go by almost every afternoon to see him for a few minutes after last period. I was still mowing a few yards before I'd settle in to do my homework. But my lifestyle was about to change, and it happened so gradually that I wasn't really aware that it was changing. A new student, Billy Bob Jamesey, enrolled in two of my classes. He wore T-shirts and jeans, penny loafers, with a dime inserted in each one, instead of pennies, and he slicked his hair back a little slicker than the other boys. The girls whispered that he was "cool" and they giggled louder whenever he came near them. The boys said he was "bad," and that was a good thing. Billy Bob told someone that he had been called "Spike" at his previous school, and soon everyone was whispering "Spike" whenever he was around. Before the second week of school was over, Spike had been sent home twice—first for not wearing socks; second, he pulled his T-shirt off while going from one class to another, and he had no undershirt on under the T. Now he was the talk of the school and the town. He was an overnight sensation to the junior high crowd. Girls whispered and giggled and hoped he would ask them for a date. Boys, and this included me, wanted to be like him, to have his courage to break the silly rules of the school. It didn't matter whether we passed our courses or not, we just wanted to get the attention he was getting.

One afternoon in September I was hanging around with some of the

other guys after school listening to Spike brag about his conquests with girls. We were all just standing around him when he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and without blinking an eye he raised his right foot to tighten his jeans over his bottom and struck a match on his butt to light the Camel he had just stuck in his mouth. We tried to look unimpressed, but when he offered Johnny one of the cigarettes, Johnny looked puzzled only for a second, and he took it, lighted it off Spike's as the latter offered it to him.

"Boys," came the voice of authority, "put the cigarettes out and come with me." It was the principal.

We started to scatter, but Mr. Johns said, "All of you. Come on inside with me. Come on, all of you."

It was the first time I'd ever been that close to Mr. Johns, our new principal, and I was scared, but I tried to look brave like the others. After we were in the office, Mr. Johns gave us all a lecture, saying that we were at school to get an education, not to learn how to become street bums. He said a lot more, but that was the gist of it. He gave a stern warning to all of us, and then told us all to go home, except Billy Bob and Johnny. He had them to stay. It was not until the next day that we learned that Billy Bob was expelled and Johnny was suspended for three days.

I had missed my piano lesson that afternoon because I was kept by the principal. And when I didn't show up, my teacher called Mrs. Ash to ask if she knew why. I was upset by the visit to the office, and I just wanted to forget the whole thing, but Mr. Ash came in person to my house to check on me, and I was less than receptive to his concern. In fact, I was a little snippy with him for getting "on my case" for this. It was nothing. But he, kindly, but firmly, told me it was more than nothing. He wanted my word that I would avoid this kind of thing in the future, but I only grunted an answer. He told me I was being disrespectful and he left. I couldn't go to sleep that night until after mid-night—thinking about the whole thing. I was upset that Mr. Ash made such a big deal out of nothing, and I felt bad for the way I had reacted toward him. My mind kept remembering... It was upsetting. I was mad at Mr. Ash and then I was mad at myself.

At school the next day I avoided Mr. Ash. I felt guilty, but why should I? The third day after it all happened I went by after school to say something to him. He wasn't in his classroom. I wandered around in the room aimlessly for a couple of minutes, trying to think of what to say. I felt I owed him an apology, but I didn't know what to say. As I walked by his desk on my way to the door to see if I could see him in the hallway, I noticed the little pearl-handled pocket knife that I had seen him take from his pocket occasionally when I was in his class and cut a string, a piece of paper or open a box, fold the little blade and put it back into his pocket. I always admired it. It was small and attractive. I looked toward the doorway and saw no one. I picked the small knife up and felt its weight, turning it in my hand to admire it from all sides; then, without any forethought, I dropped the thing into my pocket and walked out of the room and went home.

For some reason, my piano lesson didn't go so well the next afternoon, and I nearly didn't go to Mr. Ash's house for practice, but I knew he would check on me if I didn't, so I went. Mrs. Ash was the same. She complimented me on my playing and she ate cookies with me afterward before I started home. Mr. Ash had been down by the pond, doing some weeding when I rode up the driveway, and as I was leaving the house I saw him still there. He did not turn to look my way, and I knew he heard me and his wife talking as I was leaving the house. I rode down the drive and stopped. I couldn't go without saying something to him. I didn't know what to say, but I had to say something. I thought about the knife I had in my pocket, and I paused. I simply could not say anything to him now. So off I went, feeling guilty as could be.

I just rode my bike, not going home, and eventually I ended up at the Dairy Queen. I saw some of my friends there, and as I rode closer I saw Spike. Knowing I should ride on by and go home and do my homework, I let my curiosity get the better of me. I rode up to the group of boys and stopped. Spike and three other boys were smoking.

"Hey, Hunt," Johnny said. "What's up? Here, have a cig," and he handed me a Camel.

I'd never before in my life smoked a cigarette, never had the desire, never been tempted, but I took it and Spike offered me a light. With this gesture from Spike I must be *in*—accepted as one of the boys. I puffed on the cigarette and tried to inhale, strangled and coughed. The smoke burned my mouth and throat and nose.

Johnny slapped me on the back and they all laughed.

"You a virgin, Kid?" Spike teased.

I had to smoke the thing now. Drawing on the Camel a little slower than before, I managed to keep my composure. My mouth burned and I wondered why the others were smoking the things if it burned them the way it did me. They were watching me, so I slowly puffed away. Then Spike pulled a pint of Old Crow from his hip pocket and slowly took the cap off, tilted the bottle to his lips and took a big swallow. He frowned, wiped his mouth and said, "It takes a man to handle that stuff. Is there another man here?" he extended the bottle toward Johnny, and he accepted and followed Spike's lead.

I was fascinated as one by one the boys took a swig, each making a face after the swallow. When the bottle was passed to me, I hesitated only briefly and followed the lead. The stuff tasted awful! No one else said anything and neither did I.

"I need to chew some gum before going home," one of the boys said.

Seeming to know why he needed the gum, Johnny said, "Yeah, my old lady'll give me hell if she smells my breath. Juicy Fruit is what I need."

"Clove's the best," Spike spoke with authority.

"They ain't got none here."

"Sterling's got all kinds," Spike said knowingly.

We all tramped the few blocks to the store on the Square. Spike led the

way. Two of us picked up a pack of gum and headed for a cashier. As soon as we were all out the door, Spike handed the others a pack of gum each. He unwrapped a stick and put it into his mouth, saying, "No need to waste your hard-earned cash on little stuff like gum. Cigarettes either...as long as they're on a shelf somewhere."

I looked around at the others to see if they were as amazed as I was. Shocked would be a better word. They weren't.

I went home chewing my Clove gum, feeling a new sensation sweep over me. I had smoked my first cigarette, tasted my first liquor, and I tried to think that I was a man—the others had given the impression that those things made them a man. I did wonder, and I had my doubts. And why was I chewing the gum? My mom was dead, and Daddy didn't give a damn one way or the other. Damn! Why had my thoughts conjured up that word? It was a little puzzling.

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School days dragged, piano lessons were dullsville or totally skipped and my practice sessions at Mrs. Ash's were botched. I would have stopped going there altogether, but I didn't want Mr. Ash on my case—and I hated to disappoint Mrs. Ash. She was especially good to me—had been from the beginning. I tried not to think about either of them because each and every time I did I couldn't help remembering how good both of them had been—and the concern they had shown me and Daddy when Mother died and at Christmas—all the time! Damn it! Why did I have to think of them all the time?

I found myself at the Dairy Queen more and more, and as a result my grades at school were taking a beating. And the day of reckoning came when my next report card came out. Damn! I had a C in English, which had been my best subject last year. The rest were D's. My previous card had shown nothing below a B. First, I thought of Mother. What a disappointment I was to her! Then, there were Mr. and Mrs. Ash! Mother was gone, but they were ever present, and I feared to face them, and I knew for certain that day was coming and soon. Hell! Well, I'd face them like a man. They couldn't tell me what to do! But that last bit of bravado swept through my mind as swiftly as water flows from a fully-open faucet. I knew I'd have to face them, but I could dodge them for a while, and I could think of something. But before that thought was completed, there was Mr. Ash, standing in the corridor beside me as I looked at the damn cards.

"Hunt," he said seriously, "have you got a minute? I'd like to see you in my classroom, please." His hand was on my shoulder.

Now I was going to get it. Somehow, I felt about five years old. "Yes, Sir," I said meekly.

Inside his room, he pointed to a seat in front of his desk, indicating that I should sit there while he sat behind his desk. "Son, you already know why I asked you to come here. I can see it in your face. You see, there are still people who care about you. Yes, I know your mother is gone, and you

feel that your father doesn't care, but your counselor cares. The principal and all your teachers care. And, Hunt, my boy, surely I don't have to tell you that Mrs. Ash and I care."

His voice was kind and his face showed his feeling of concern. Why didn't he fuss at me? Yell at me? Threaten me? I couldn't look at him. I was ashamed. I knew I had let him and Mrs. Ash down. He continued and I fought back the tears.

"Son, I'm partially to blame for this."

I didn't raise my head, but I said quickly, "No, Sir, it's all my fault."

"Hunt, you're still a boy. Your mother is gone, and your father is away a good deal of the time. I should have been checking on you. I want to apologize for not keeping up with what you were doing in class, or not doing. If you'll accept my apology, I'll give you my word that from now on I'll be there for you more. I have no excuse."

He got up from his chair and walked to me and raised my bowed head. The tears were really embarrassing me now. How could I have let him down like this? He handed me his handkerchief, and once again I smelled the freshness, and it reminded me of that other time I had cried into his handkerchief. A sob escaped me, and he simply stood there with his hand on my shoulder, his kind concern flowing from him to me.

I eventually blew my nose and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ash. I'm so sorry. I've let you down, haven't I? And Mrs. Ash... and my mother..."

"Son, you're still a boy—a boy filled with promise—but no one can expect you to accept the responsibility that you've been saddled with all by yourself. I'll be there for you from now on, and that's a promise."

"Mr. Ash, I'm behind in my classes, and I don't know if I can catch up."

"Sure you can, and I'll help you. You're going to make your mother proud of you still. She has been, you know, and understands that a boy is due a mistake or two. Believe me, I know. Now, I want you to stand up straight and walk out of here, knowing that those grades are coming up, and by the end of the school year your grade point average will be high again. Remember I'll be there to help you from now on.... Would you like to come to my house this afternoon, and we could look over those assignments for tomorrow?"

His kindness overwhelmed me. I dropped my head again and said, "Mr. Ash, I'm sorry. I've really fooled around these last weeks and I've wasted time, and I've let you down. I'm sorry."

He raised my head with both hands and said, "Son, one mistake doesn't make a failure. You see, I know you well enough to be sure that you're going to correct this."

I tried to smile, but failed. "Yes, Sir," and I put my arms around his neck the way I had done before, and with his response, I felt better, as before. Yes, I could, and yes, I would.

I left my bicycle locked in the rack at the school that afternoon and rode home with him, taking all my books, ready and willing to start catching up.

Mrs. Ash met us at the door, smiling, and said, "My goodness, Hunt, you're almost as tall as Mr. Ash. How you've grown since I've known you. You'll be a man before we know it."

I couldn't suppress a wide smile, and when she hugged me, I laughed a little. That small laugh was a sweet release of what I suddenly realized was a bitter burden I had been carrying. I think both of them understood my feelings at that moment and there was no need to voice it.

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As I got back into the old pattern of school, delivering papers, going to piano lessons and practice at Mr. Ash's house, there was little time for the Dairy Queen. More and more I did homework, and extra work to make up for my getting behind, at the Ashes after piano lessons. With Mrs. Ash's constant praise, I began to enjoy the piano more—much more. I wanted to play more and more, if for no other reason than to please her. There was always plenty of food there—for snacks and for supper before I went home at nights—and I relished it all because the Ashes were good company. Our conversations were interesting to me. And, with Mr. Ash's suggestions, I was learning a whole new method of studying. His suggestions made the study easier and I learned more and in less time. Learning was becoming much more interesting, and I didn't mind the hours I was putting into it.

There was just one thing that wasn't right—that little pocket knife. It weighed heavier and heavier on my mind. I had ceased to carry it in my pocket. I had taken it to school day after day, thinking each day that I would go by Mr. Ash's room, and if he were not there, I'd put it back on his desk and say nothing, but he was always there. I just couldn't get up enough courage to walk up to him and hand it to him. More than once I thought I was prepared to do just that, but then when I would see his smiling face, and always he would have an encouraging word for me, I just couldn't do it. I knew I had betrayed his trust and that thought was ever with me. I considered taking it to the office and saying I'd found it, but there was the possibility that he wouldn't get it returned to him. I nearly asked one of his students to give it to him, but I knew there would be questions. So, I put the knife in a box on my dresser at home and tried to forget it, but I couldn't. My act of taking that little knife nagged at me like an unhealing sore.

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With my ever busier schedule of schoolwork, piano and the paper route that continued to grow because of word-of-mouth of my "satisfactory service," the school year was nearing its end. I couldn't believe that May was on us, and we were selecting subjects for the next year. And I would enter the ninth grade—still in the junior high school building, but I'd be a freshman. I couldn't believe it. As we worked with counselors, getting set for the next school year, I decided to take some easy courses. That way,