

The Amber Curtain

By Jake Kaminski

*Once, he was young and fearless.
Now he was old...and afraid of everything.*

It was a September morning in nineteen-sixty when the young, dark-haired boy stepped off his porch and onto the sidewalk. Though this Saturday seemed like most others, it would be no ordinary day. A chance encounter just one hundred feet from his front door was about to shape his young life in a way that he would not understand fully until he closed his eyes for the last time.

Standing next to the spreading chestnut tree that stood in front of his house, he stopped for a moment for no particular reason. Maybe it was just the feel of the gentle sun on his face, cooled by the brush of the fresh, fall breeze. The musky scent of fallen leaves filled the air, their decomposition releasing whatever energy that remained of last summer's sun. Jake stepped forward and took in a deep breath, relishing the warm smell of the baking leaves and smiling as the brightly colored carpet crackled beneath his feet.

Autumn came early to Wisconsin. While many of the kids in the neighborhood hated for summer to end, Jake was happy that school was back in session. He loved school. The books, the wooden desks, even the scents drifting from the lunch room made him feel safe and warm. Besides, summer had been boring. He was a few years younger than the other kids in the neighborhood...even among kids his own age he was small. His grandma said *puny*. As a result, he was often left out of the games the bigger kids played on the playground.

He stepped onto the sidewalk and looked around to see if anyone was outside playing. Nothing. He glanced across the street to Ketter's Drug Store. It was early and while he knew they wouldn't be open yet, he looked forward to looking over the latest additions to the comic book rack. The new *Batman* was definitely overdue. In anticipation, Jake reflexively dug into the pocket of his jeans, fingering the fifteen cents his grandmother had given him. Life was good.

The drug store was more than a place to buy medicine. Moms could buy perfume, makeup and all sorts of soaps, brooms and sponges. Dads could purchase shaving cream, razors and other essentials. For kids, it was much more magical. There was a soda fountain, a candy counter and the comic books.

Mr. Ketter, the kindly grey-haired owner, always stood perched on the raised platform where he filled prescriptions all day. His ability to see all, while looking over the glasses perched on the end of his nose, was legendary. Along one wall was a long lunch counter with round, red-vinyl stools. It was here that Mrs. Schultz prepared the best ice cream shakes and malts in the world...at least that was the general consensus of the kids in the neighborhood. Jake thought it must be true because Patricia Campbell said so...and heck, she had been all the way to Florida.

The beloved comic book rack, a turnstile affair that squeaked every time it moved, was situated just inside the front door and in direct line of sight to the druggist. Most days he could be seen

smiling gently as young boys looked with wide-eyed anticipation at the drawings of Superman, Flash and Batman as they sprang into action on the covers of the brightly colored comics. Mr. Ketter would allow any boy to examine each issue closely, but no reading was allowed. Reading cost a dime. After all, Ketter's wasn't a library. Inevitably, if a boy became too engrossed in the pages without thinking, he would be gently reminded by a clearing of the throat from above.

Jake couldn't wait for the store to open. He decided to cross the street to check if the delivery man had left a bundle of new comics on the sidewalk in front of the store. There was something exciting about seeing that tightly bound pile of stories of superheroes, each promising unlimited adventure. Sometimes the imagining was even better than the reading.

As he crossed the street, he looked to his right and saw a boy in the yard of the house next door. He had heard his mom and dad talking about the new people who had moved in recently but nobody seemed to know much about them. They never said anything about them having any kids...He watched as the boy carried a watering can over to a wooden wishing well placed centrally in their front yard. He continued to observe the boy as he poured the contents of the can into the well. The kid then refilled it and returned to the well once again. Of course, it wasn't a "real" wishing well, but it sure looked like the ones that Jake had seen in books and movies. In reality it was a planter, where flowers bloomed throughout the spring and summer. He started back across the street, moving toward the new boy as if on autopilot.

Jake called out. "What ya doing?" The boy didn't seem to hear him.

Louder, Jake repeated. "Hey, what you doing?"

"What's it look like?" The boy turned toward Jake, wondering if the kid was a bit slow.

"But it isn't summer anymore. Flowers don't grow now." Jake providing a scientific explanation.

"They do too. What do you know?" He then looked closer at Jake. "How old are you anyway, six?"

"Eight." Jake mumbled, the toe of his PF Flyer now making nervous circles in the dirt. It wasn't the first time he had been called out for his small stature.

"Yeah?" The boy looked at Jake doubtfully.

"I am eight! I'm just short for my age." Jake answering defensively. Then added, "Lots of kids are!"

The boy shrugged dismissively, turning back to the well and resuming his watering of the dead geraniums.

Jake continued watching the new kid, shaking his head in disbelief. He then took a closer look at the boy. The kid sure did look older than him. "How old are you?"

“Almost nine,” as if there was a huge distinction. As the last drops of water dripped from the spout, the boy turned back to Jake and set down the can. “Where do you live?” looking questioningly down the street.

Jake pointed silently over his shoulder at his house. “I live downstairs.”

“You live here long?”, the new kid walking toward where Jake stood.

Jake scratched the toe of his shoe on the ground. “All my life, I guess. My mom says we lived someplace else when I was little, but I don’t remember.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jake.”

“Jake what?”

“Jake Kaminski. My grandma calls me Jacob. Says it’s from Poland. My grandpa was named Jacob too. Never met him though. He died before I was born.”

“I’m Eugene. We just moved here. Used to live up north. We traded houses with the lady that used to live here.”

Jake listened quietly, bending down to pick a long blade of grass and placing it between his teeth. He’d seen the bigger kids do it and thought it might make an impression. Then, “I knew that lady, she used to have a big mean dog.”

“Is there anything to do around here?” Eugene seemed to be warming to his new neighbor.

Jake removed the blade of grass from where it had become stuck to his lip and dropped it on the ground. It tasted terrible. “Yeah. Lots of stuff.” Jake’s mind was now racing to come up with something good.

“Like what?” Eugene challenged.

“The playground’s right down there,” Jake pointing down the street. “School is there too...it started three weeks ago.”

“That where you go?” Eugene was smiling wryly.

“Uh huh. I’m in third grade...second half. I skipped a semester.” Jake proclaimed this fact proudly, but cautiously. He had heard his mom telling his dad that some of the neighbors were unhappy that he had been pushed ahead of their kids. Some sort of jealous thing was what his dad had said. He watched Eugene and it didn’t seem to faze him one way or the other.

Jake continued, “You gonna go there too?”

“Yeah. Where else would I go?” Eugene’s eyebrows arched questioningly.

“But you’re late. School started already...” Jake had never heard of anyone starting school three weeks late.

Eugene just chuckled. “I’ll catch up I guess.”

Jake suddenly remembered, “Oh, there’s a Catholic school too. Some of the kids go there. But everyone at school says those kids are sissies...My mom says it costs too much money.” Jake shrugged, thinking that it was just more grown-up stuff. For him it was simple. *‘Why would you pay money to go to Catholic school when there was a great school just down the street for free?’*

A lull in the conversation settled between them for a moment. Then Eugene spoke, “Wanna do something?”

Jake, a bit surprised, “Yeah. Wanna go see Devil’s Island?”

“What’s that?” Eugene now interested.

“It’s a secret hideout.” Jake was immediately animated. “It’s behind a big old house up the street. Nobody really knows about it. We have to sneak through an old man’s yard, but it’s pretty cool.”

“Which way is it?”

“This way.” The smaller boy pointed as the two headed down the street. The watering can was left on the ground near the well as Eugene placed his arm over Jake’s shoulder like they had been friends for life.

“Let’s go.”

And that was that. A friendship that would last a lifetime. No fanfare. No judgements. Nothing...and everything.

It was April of nineteen seventy-four and the tropical sun was warm, but not oppressive. The magnolias were in full bloom and a scented wind blew gently through the royal palms overhead. If you had a vivid imagination, you might even imagine the sweet smell of the sugar cane fields west of the city. A bright blue Chevy Impala cruised along Brickell Avenue, a Cuban song playing rhythmically on the radio.

Thirty young police recruits stood proudly on the Miami Bayfront Park stage in their dress blues. Chests empty, no badges or medals, each recruit anticipating a career that would fill those

shirtfronts. Families looked on. Young wives gently bounced little ones on their hips. Mothers and fathers smiled, eyes glistening with pride, trepidation held at bay for what came next.

The Chief of Police solemnly pinned badges on the newly minted police officers one by one, each standing a little taller once the shield was fixed upon their chest. Was the transition so immediate? The young recruits seemed like thoroughbreds waiting, straining to burst from the gates. To protect and serve...a code as noble as any legend could conjure.

“Officer Kaminski,” the Chief stopping in front of the swarthy young man.

Stepping forward and standing at full attention, Jake stood rock solid as the Chief pinned his badge. He saluted smartly and stepped back with precision. Smiling, he gazed proudly into the amazingly blue sky above the city skyline. He was on his way.

Nineteen sixty-one was the coldest winter anybody could remember. Lake Michigan had frozen over for the first time in a hundred years. The boys’ school had already closed five times on account of snow. Any boy’s dream come true.

They had been waiting patiently for Jake’s dad to come home from work. It didn’t occur to them that he was probably exhausted after a full day’s work at the factory and a long walk home through the snow and ice. They only knew that they were warm and he would be home any minute.

“Now Jake, you let your dad get through the door before you boys pounce all over him. He’s had a hard day and he needs to get his supper first.” Even as his mom said it, she knew her words were pointless. As if on cue, the boys heard her husband stomping the snow from his boots in the hallway and sprang excitedly from their chairs. The door opened and the lean, dark man she had married stepped into the kitchen, the cold outside air meeting warm air laden with the rich odor of beef stew and freshly baked bread.

“Dad! We’re *really* ready tonight! We’ve been practicing all day.” Jake running up to hug his father as he struggled to take off his coat. His father’s rough black stubble felt like sandpaper on Jake’s face but he loved it.

Eugene interjected cautiously, “Not exactly *all* day Jake. We did go skating this morning...”

“Well, almost all day!” Jake hurried to the kitchen table and picked up a pile of cards. He turned around ceremoniously with his hands full. “See, we’ve got the flash-cards ready!”

Jake’s dad smiled, putting his hand gently on Eugene’s head as he moved into the room toward the kitchen table. Jake’s mom was quick to intervene. “Boys, what did I tell you? Let the poor man get his supper. There will be plenty of time afterwards.” She stepped between the clamoring boys to give her husband a quick kiss, shaking her head good-naturedly.

In the meantime, Jake grabbed his dad’s massive wool coat from his hands, still wet with melting snow. “I’ll get it Dad.” As he reached up to hang the overcoat on the hook next to the doorway,

he lingered happily on the scent of his father captured in the folds of the coat. He ran his hand slowly along the smooth satin of the lining, feeling the last traces of warmth from the walk home.

Jake's mom busied herself ladling the rich, brown stew from a bubbling pot for her husband. The boys, having already eaten, patiently watched as the bowl's contents were reduced with each spoonful. They exchanged looks as the man began to soak up the last of his supper with warm slices of freshly baked Polish black bread. Finally, he pushed deliberately back from the table. The boys held their collective breath...He paused a moment for effect, then, smiling, he looked over at Eugene. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

Both boys quickly set about re-arranging the chairs so that they could sit directly across from Jake's dad. They then handed him the flashcards, telling him to shuffle them "really good". It was then that the table transformed into a place of magic. Mr. Kaminski would flash a card and the boys would race to see who could give the correct answer first. Ties were decided by Jake's mom, the designated impartial third party. Eugene was always the first to appeal to her fair judgement. "Mrs. Kaminski, who was first..." Nine times out of ten she sided with Eugene.

Eugene, happy to be proven right, would exclaim excitedly, "See, I told you Jake!"

And so went that winter evening. Jake's mom stood at the sink, watching her three "boys" as they chattered and laughed in the warm yellow light of the little kitchen.

Christmas in Miami. No snow, no shoppers bundled up against the cold wind, no hot chocolate sipped in front of cozy fireplaces. Instead, it was tall coconut palms blowing in the warm tropical breezes that drifted up from exotic islands to the south. It was azure blue waters, soft brown sand and a sun that reassuringly warmed the skin. An alternate universe to the rest of America.

If you wanted an old-fashioned white Christmas, you'd better turn up the air conditioning and watch an old black and white movie on the late show. This far south, the holidays were marked differently. Here, it was mostly the noticeable increase in retirees on the beach, their ridiculously tanned skin making them look like mummified versions of their younger selves. In the evenings, ancient couples strolled the sidewalks, pausing to greet other affluent elderly escapees from the frigid northern cities like New York and Chicago. Men strolled casually with IZOD sweaters tied over their shoulders, their bright yellow pants and pale blue guayabera shirts worn proudly, almost like a uniform.

It was the end of nineteen seventy-four, Elton John was singing Benny and the Jets on the car radio and Jake was adapting nicely to his new life in the Florida tropics. On the mainland, a short trip over a causeway and miles from the beaches, Jake made his way through the light traffic on his way to work. The City of Miami, though close to the famous beaches, was a totally different creature. Here was where the regular people worked, lived and died. This was where the real world began...a melting pot. Working people and poor people...immigrants from Cuba and the

rest of the Caribbean. The folks in the city weren't on vacation and had little time for strolls on the beach.

Jake smiled as he drove through the tree-lined neighborhood on his way to work. Windows down, he could hear the rhythm of a distant boom box in the distance. To his right was a young man, struggling with a flat tire, looking up suspiciously as Jake's car passed. Their eyes meeting, Jake nodded and smiled slightly. Slowing for traffic, Jake took a long breath; the scent of gardenias and hibiscus floated on the warm and moist air. He thought briefly how different this place was from the world he had left. Shaking his head in wonder, he braked and turned his 1970 Monte Carlo into the parking lot of the Miami Police Department's Central District.

An hour later Jake and his training officer wheeled their police cruiser out of the parking lot and onto the street to begin their tour of duty. After signing on, it was only minutes before the radio crackled to life. Jake grabbed the mike from the cradle and acknowledged the dispatcher. "One-twelve go".

"Report of disturbance at 2330 Orange Avenue, apartment 3." The dispatcher's voice calm and steady, continued: "Multiple reports of a woman screaming."

"10-4"

The driver spoke to the windshield. "We've been to this place before. Watch yourself, the husband or boyfriend...or whatever the fuck he is, is a real asshole. If it's the same guy, he's got priors for domestic violence. They've referred this one for prosecution several times but she keeps dropping the charges, saying he didn't do it. I think she's too scared of the son of a bitch to do anything. He's gonna end up killing her one day. I'd bet on it." He paused a minute, then: "Remember Jake, this one's yours...Come next week you'll be on your own..."

Jake nodded and smiled to himself. His time in field training was almost over. The last three months had been a real eye-opener. *Not anything like the Academy, that's for sure.* Looking back, the Academy had been a sterile place. Training had been done with videos and movies. He had learned quickly that people were different in real life...much more emotional. It was much harder to reason with them than they had told him in the Academy. He chuckled to himself, guessing it would be easier if the citizens could go to their own academy so that they would know what was expected of them...you know, everyone on the same page. His thoughts were interrupted as the cruiser braked suddenly. He reached out reflexively to steady himself on the dash as his partner took a sharp turn into the projects.

The projects were a series of townhouse apartments that had seen better days. The area where there should have been lawns was nothing more than tamped down dirt, most of it harder than the nearby asphalt parking lot. Approaching the scene, Jake and his partner knew exactly where they were headed. A crowd, mostly women of various ages, was gathered around the entrance to the apartment. A young, attractive black woman sat dejectedly on the concrete slab that led to

her home. Her hair was disheveled and her dress torn with traces of blood on her right shoulder. She was surrounded by several older women, one busily applying a wet compress to the woman's forehead. The crowd parted grudgingly as the sound of the officers' walkies announced their approach. Black faces looked accusingly at the two men as they politely wove their way through the women.

Jake crouched down in front of the young woman. "Ma'am, you okay?"

No response, just silence; the woman holding a damp and bloody washcloth in front of her nose and mouth.

"Ma'am. I'm Officer Kaminski. Could you tell me what happened here?"

Another long pause, the woman's huge brown eyes looking sadly over the cloth, silently assessing the young man in front of her. An older woman, standing protectively nearby, interjected on her behalf before she could respond to Jake's question. "He beat her again. He always beatin' on this girl. Why don't you *po*-lice do something? The wrinkled old woman emphasizing the *po* in police as was normal in the projects.

"Ma'am, did you see any of this?" Jake was looking up the woman questioningly.

"I didn't need to see it. I HEARD IT!" The old woman was looking around at the other women and gaining authority from their murmurs of agreement. "Every time that worthless Jones boy come and lay up here, he end up hurting this girl. What you gonna do about it, Mr. *police* man?"

Jake looked over at his training officer, recalling the lessons he had already learned about the reality of the projects. Life was tough, brutal, and merciless. The people that lived here had no expectations of justice. This was not a world Jake recognized. He had heard a lot of the older officers talking. They didn't seem to care much and some went out of their way to ridicule the younger officers who still thought they could make a difference.

Jake turned back to the victim, who had been listening intently to the discussions. "Miss, if you tell me who did this, I will find him and arrest him...I promise..."

He waited for a response. Nothing... just tears running silently down her ebony cheeks. He let the question go, choosing instead to sit down next to her, reaching out to gently take her hand. He held it for what became a very long time, the woman just sobbing quietly into the bloody cloth, her hopelessness travelling like a current between them.

It was the summer of nineteen sixty-one. Mickey Mantle was busy hitting home runs and President Kennedy was telling America it was going to the moon. Black Americans in Mississippi were not so interested in going to the moon as getting a seat on a bus. Meanwhile, Del Shannon was singing *Runaway* on the radio and three young boys made their way across

Milwaukee's North Avenue Bridge, two of them chattering energetically. All of them were oblivious to the bigger problems of the world.

The boys had their swimsuits and towels rolled up and tucked under their arms. They were on their way to the public pool at Gordon Park. One of the kids walked quietly, sandwiched safely between Jake and Eugene. Stanley was a timid kid and quiet by nature. The boys didn't care about that and were happy to include him in their adventures. He smiled broadly as Eugene put his arm around his shoulder protectively, the bigger boy's hand resting on the threadbare shirt that hung loosely on Stanley's scrawny body. The boy always dressed like he had taken his clothes from a rag bag but this meant nothing to the two other boys. They knew Stanley had no money. His mom was poor; she rented a flat on their street. Her husband was gone, killed in the war. She worked a lot...a job down at the Rambler factory and odd jobs when she could find them. Jake had heard his mom and dad talking about how unfair it was.

Stanley's friendship with Eugene and Jake meant more than the two boys could possibly have imagined at their young age. The boy loved his mom, but it wasn't the same at all. Having no dad was tough. Nobody to teach him stuff...important stuff like playing baseball and riding a bike. He hated it when his mom tried to do that stuff with him. He knew she was doing her best...but it was just easier not to learn those things at all than do them with you mom...a *girl* after all.

When the boys had taken him under their wing, it had been the best day of his life. Eugene could do everything better than the other kids in school. He was faster, bigger and tougher than anyone Stanley had ever known. He still remembered the day when one of the bigger kids had cornered him on the playground, pushing him around and making fun of his hand-me-down clothes. Eugene had walked between the two and stood toe to toe with the older boy. The bully had tried to shove Eugene only to find himself grabbed in a choke hold and thrown unceremoniously to the blacktop. Nobody had ever bothered young Stanley again.

Eugene stopped in the middle of the bridge and bent down to pick up a stone on the sidewalk. He leaned over the railing and dropped the stone, counting out loud as it fell into the river.

"Six seconds. I wonder how long it would take if we jumped into the river..."

Jake joined him at the railing. "I don't know. But I'd never do it. What if it's too shallow? You'd die and get smashed into a million pieces!"

"It's not too shallow. It's the Milwaukee River. It's deep. We could probably do it."

"Not me brother. Not me..."

"Me either," Stanley piped in tentatively from behind the two boys.

Just then a flock of pigeons flew under the bridge, disappearing from view and landing on the ironworks supporting the span.

Jake shouted, “Did you see that? I can hear them. I think they’re right under us.”

Jake and Eugene leaned out farther from the rail, trying to see exactly where the birds had gone.

Eugene pulled back onto the sidewalk. “I can hear them, but we gotta go over to the end of the bridge to see ‘em.”

Jake was in full agreement and all three boys sprinted to the far end of the bridge, eventually descending the bank next to where the bridge began. Ten feet down the bank they stopped. They could now see the underside of the expanse. All iron and steel, the framework stretched across the entire river valley. Looking out, it had to be at least a hundred feet from the beams down to the surface of the water. This wasn’t important to the boys, though. They only had eyes for the pigeons, who were nested all along the beams of the bridgeworks.

Eugene was the first to observe excitedly, “There must be hundreds of em, maybe thousands!”

“I think thousands...or more.”, Jake staring and commenting in agreement. “You know, we could catch some and raise them at home. We could build a coop and use them to send messages.” It didn’t seem to matter that they already lived next door to each other and had nobody else to whom they would need to send secret messages...

Stanley looked on, a huge smile on his face. This could really be good. He glanced briefly down at the river and trembled, unconsciously stepping back a few steps. He quietly interjected, “How we gonna get up there?”

Jake and Eugene stopped talking and looked back at Stanley, both incredulous. Jake quickly explained. “It’s no big deal. We can just walk out on the beams and grab `em. Easy. We can just hang onto the bars and walk out.”

Stanley stood there in awe. Maybe *they* could do it. *He*, on the other hand, could not. Never in a million years. Not one to disagree with Jake and Eugene normally, he ventured, “I don’t know...That’s pretty high. Really high...”, the boy looking down at the river as he spoke. Eugene opined. “Ahh, it ain’t that high. We can do it easy. Not you Stanley. Your mom would be mad. You can stay here and watch our stuff.”

Jake added, looking at Stanley, “Yeah, we can go out and catch them and then you can wrap ‘em in the towels.”

Stanley stood mute. Then after cautious consideration, “OK”, suddenly bending down to unroll his towel and spread it on the ground. A future carrier for their birds...

Jake and Eugene quickly handed their towels to Stanley for safekeeping. Eugene was the first to step out onto the iron girder. He gripped the beam above his head for balance and purposefully started moving step by step out across the river. Jake was soon to follow suit, taking the same beam and following his friend out over the abyss. He could already see the fine collection of birds they would gather. He was hoping for one of the black and white ones that he had seen fly

under them on the bridge. They would teach it to carry secret messages across the city. He was so excited he almost forgot to hang on to the beam above him.

“They’re not that far!” Eugene pronouncing from his advance position on the beam. “Wow, they’re everywhere. There’s even babies!”

“Wait for me. I wanna see too.” Jake shouting excitedly as he worked his way around the iron braces.

“I am waiting. Just be careful. Your ma will kill us if we fall off..”

Jake briefly wondered how his mom could kill them if they were already dead, but decided not to dwell on technicalities.

After a few more minutes of inching across the beam, the boys came to a stop. They were in the middle of the span. Eugene was right. There *were* millions of pigeons out here. They weren’t very happy either. They were flying and darting everywhere. Feathers were billowing around the boys like clouds of dust.

Jake was coughing from the feathery chaos around him. He waved his right hand in front of his face to clear the clouds of down and dust. “I think there’s too many of them! I can’t see too good.”

Eugene was half listening and had already managed to grab a pigeon. It was struggling in his hands but he finally managed to stuff it into his shirt, working quickly to button it back up to keep the bird in place.

Fully satisfied that the bird was indeed caught, he looked back at Jake. “Just grab one. Put it into your shirt like I did. We can take it back to Stanley and then come out for more.”

Jake nodded in agreement and started scanning the area closest to him for a likely target. He took two more steps and grabbed two cross beams. He glanced briefly downward and was shocked at how far away the river looked... *‘Wow! Maybe we should have thought this through a little more...’*

Stanley, on the other hand, was beginning to have second thoughts about the entire caper. He kept looking at his friends standing precariously on the beams and then down at the river. *‘That’s a long way down. What if they fall?’* He was sure he would be in big trouble no matter what happened. If he was the last one left alive, they would probably blame him for the whole thing. Send him to jail or something...probably wouldn’t even let him finish the third grade.... Reflexively he backed up the hill a bit, where he could now see the people and cars passing by.

Suddenly, Stanley heard his name being called from up on the bridge. He was surprised. Who would be calling him here?

“Stanley? Is that you?” An adult called again from up on the bridge.

Stanley looked up in the direction of the voice, thinking innocently, *'Of course it's me. Who else could I be?'*

Finally, realizing it was Jake's dad, Stanley responded, "Yes sir, it's me." Then thinking, *'This can't be good.'* He then looked furtively toward the boys and returned his attention to Jake's dad, the realization hitting him that he was now doomed for sure.

Mr. Kaminski stood there, his metal lunch box in hand, trying to figure out why the timid boy would be standing alone next to a steep river embankment. After a few prolonged moments, things started to come into focus. *'Jake and Eugene have to be involved in this...'* "Are you here by yourself Stanley?"

The boy hesitated, knowing that there was really no good answer. "No..." the boy looking nervously over his shoulder.

Jake's father set his lunch box on the sidewalk and started down the incline.

"Where are they Stanley?" He was now certain that the boys were up to something.

Stanley couldn't bring himself to speak. *'You never really know how grownups will react to things.'* Instead, he just silently pointed out over the river.

Looking out to the ironwork under the bridge, the man could see the boys hopping around on the beams like Mohawk steeplejacks.

"Jesus Christ!" Jake's dad startling Stanley. He paused a second. "What the hell...?" the man now speaking to nobody in particular.

Stanley, having no real memory of his own father, always wondered why men tended to cuss when they got mad. Moms didn't do that. The worst his mom could ever manage was "holy buckets" or something equally puzzling. He wondered how he would ever learn to swear like a man with no dad around... *'Surely he couldn't go around saying something like 'holy buckets' when he grew up...'*

"What the hell are they doing out there?" Totally bewildered, Mr. Kaminski's eyes remained fixed on the iron span.

"Pigeons." Stanley spoke as if that one word explained everything.

"What?" Jake's dad asking over his shoulder.

"We're gonna raise pigeons. Jake and Eugene are catching us a few to get started."

“Jesus...Whose idea was that?” Jake’s dad knowing that it was irrelevant at this point and that it was probably Jake, who was always coming up with these grand ideas. *‘These boys are trying to kill me. A heart attack...No, probably a stroke.’*

Stanley heard the question but chose not to answer. He knew it would break some code of honor if he did, and besides, they were all going to be in big trouble anyway. No use complicating things now.

Realizing that Stanley was not going to be any further help, he directed the boy to wait up on the bridge. Then, turning to the two out over the water, he saw Jake stuffing something into his shirt. Eugene was right next to him helping him to button up the front. He did his best to calmly call out to the boys, “Jake...Eugene...”

The boys had not heard him. Once again, a bit louder, “Jake! Hey Jake... Eugene!”

The boys looked up in unison, totally surprised to see Jake’s dad and wondering where the heck Stanley had gone. They were going to need him to wrap up the birds...

Jake replied immediately, “Dad!” We got some pigeons! There’s millions of ‘em out here!”

Eugene chimed in, “Yeah Mr. Kaminski, we already caught two!”

“Ok boys. Now just bring them back this way now. Slowly.”

Eugene shouted out as they edged away from the center of the span, “Where’s Stanley? We told his ma we’d watch out for him.”

“He’s fine. Just concentrate on what you’re doing. Take it slowly guys.” Kaminski was doing his best to remain calm and not do anything to frighten the boys as they made their way back to him. As he watched their progress, he noticed that both of them appeared to be struggling with the birds that were stuffed inside of their shirts. The pigeons had evidently decided that they wanted nothing to do with their present situation and were now flapping their wings, frantically squirming to escape. The commotion was causing the boys to let go of their grips on the beams above in order to contain their captive birds. It was chaos.

Kaminski didn’t really know what to do but worry. He watched as Jake struggled mightily with his bird. It was moving around so much that it looked like the boy’s shirt had a life of its own. The situation was untenable and Jake now seemed to realize it. He wrapped one arm around a beam and began to pull at his shirt with his other hand. He had figured out that if he pulled his shirt out of his pants the bird would drop out, which it did, flying gratefully away. Eugene, the stronger of the two, managed to hold his bird in his shirt with one hand while gripping the beam above at the same time.

Finally, the boys stepped down from the bridgework. Both were excited and eager to relate the adventure to Jake’s dad. He listened to the boys and couldn’t decide what to do. Yell at them; give them a quick swat; or just let it go. He opted for the last.

“Boys, what the heck were you doing? That could have been dangerous...What if you had fallen?”

Jake was bubbling. “It wasn’t so bad dad. The secret is not to look down!”

Eugene was busy gently pulling his bird from his shirt. He brought it out and showed it to Jake’s dad like a lost treasure. “Look at this, Mr. Kaminski.”

The man couldn’t help smiling in spite of himself. On closer look, however, he noticed that both of the boys had scratch marks all over their chests from the birds’ feet. He stepped forward to conduct a closer inspection.

“Jake, hold still. Look at all these scratches. Does it hurt?”

“Heck no dad. I’m fine.”

“Eugene, what about you?”

“I’m fine Mr. Kaminski.”

Eugene was already looking at Jake. “We can put this one in a box in my garage until we build the coop.”

“Can you help us dad?” Jake looked up at his dad expectantly.

Kaminski, smiling, just shook his head and corralled the two boys in order to guide them up the embankment to the street. As they reached the sidewalk, they found a very relieved Stanley, who, after seeing everybody laughing and joking, looked like he had just received a last-minute reprieve from the Governor.

Mr. Kaminski tried to bring the group under control. “Guys, have you got your swimsuits and the rest of your things?”

The boys weren’t even listening. Jake was already leaning toward Eugene and reaching for the beautiful jet-black pigeon. “Let me pet him for a second.” All three boys stopped, Eugene cradling the bird and Jake reaching in to gently stroke its neck. Stanley stood back a bit, frightened to reach in, content to watch the other boys actually touch the bird.

Jake’s dad briefly considered saying something about germs but decided that it would be pointless. The man gently gathered up the boys... and their bird, and resumed his walk home. The boys surrounded him, talking non-stop. They were on top of the world. Grudgingly, he couldn’t help wishing that he was one of them.

A block later, Eugene slowed and reached over to Stanley and pulled him closer. “You can pet it if you want. It won’t hurt you.”

Stanley stepped shyly between the two boys and stroked the bird carefully, smiling from ear to ear.

Nineteen eighty-two. Miami was a city of change. Nobody felt like it was for the better. Two years earlier, the Mariel Boatlift had deposited over a hundred thousand Cuban refugees in Miami. Most were looking for a better life, but some were hard-core criminals or totally insane. For the cops on the street, it was tough to know who was who. Castro was having a good laugh at America's expense.

The marked unit moved quickly through the Miami neighborhood, running silently, no lights and no siren. Jake knew his beat. After ten years of working night shifts, he knew the street lights were more than enough by which to navigate. It was a prowler call; the woman said a man was at her window trying to force entry. She was screaming at the 911 operator, pleading for help. "My kids are here, hurry...please!" followed by a crash and another prolonged scream. Dispatch was doing its best to relay the events to the responding units.

"Sounds fucked..." Jake's long-time partner, Ron, commented calmly.

They parked the cruiser a few houses up the street, carefully exiting the car and leaving their doors ajar in order to approach undetected. Both officers silenced their walkies and moved quietly through the front yards of the darkened street.

Seconds later, the silence was broken with a primal scream coming from the open front door of the complainant's house. The officers instinctively split up, both moving toward the scream, guns drawn. Suddenly, in the front doorway, a man appeared. He moved quickly into the front yard, dragging a small blond woman by her hair. In his right hand was an automatic pistol, which he first raised toward the officers and then pointed directly at the head of the woman.

"Sir, drop the gun, now!" Jake commanded loudly.

The man, sweating profusely, pulled the woman's hair tighter and yelled at the officers. "Fuck you!"

The woman was now on her knees, held upright only by the man's grip on her long hair. "He's my husband." the woman blubbing as an explanation. "My ex-husband! He can't be here!"

The man responded by pulling her closer and snarling in her ear. "Shut the fuck up bitch!" He then looked up at the officers and roared. "This is my house!" Now waving the gun back and forth from the woman and then toward the officers.

Jake looked at the woman. Her hair stretched to the limits, blood forming at the edge of her hairline. Her face contorted in pain every time the man wrapped her locks tighter in his fist. She was trying in vain to wipe the tears and snot from her lip and mouth.

The husband roared a stream of profanities at the woman, continuing to press the barrel of the gun violently into her cheek. Suddenly, the air rang with a single gunshot. The man went silent and stared vacantly as if he had forgotten what he wanted to say. He then crumpled to the ground, having uttered his last words.

Ron approached the man quickly, gun pointed directly at the prone suspect. He kicked the man's pistol out of reach and leaned down to check for a pulse. Nothing.

Jake walked slowly forward, his gun hanging loosely at his side and pointing at the ground.

"It's ok Jake. It was a good shoot. You did what you had to do." Ron's words calm and reassuring.

The woman began to keel and howl mournfully. "You killed him! Why did you kill him? I called you for help... You murdered my husband!" Two little ones emerged from the front door, running to their mother and grasping desperately at her skirt as she screamed obscenities at anyone who would listen.

Jake sat down on the grass. Sirens and blue lights were coming from all directions. A crowd was already gathering and he could hear bits and pieces of conversation as a backdrop to the chaos. "Why did they shoot him? Did they really have to kill him? Look at those poor children."

A sergeant leaned quietly over Jake, reaching gently for the Glock pistol in his hand. "Let me have the weapon Jake. It's over now."

Jake absently released the firearm and stared silently at the tragic tableau that spread out before him. He could hear the two children crying and calling, "Daddy..."

Summer vacation was over. The weather had already turned cold and rainy. The boys couldn't believe their luck. The nineteen sixty-two Cuban Missile Crisis was only two months away but Milwaukee remained in a timeless bubble, relaxing to the songs of Johnny Mathis and Patsy Cline.

Eugene stood next to the small, square trapdoor in the wall that opened into the clothes chute. He stuck his head in and looked up and down the metal ductwork. He turned back to Jake. "I could do it." pronouncing it like he had just discovered uranium. "I could climb in upstairs and slide all the way down to the basement."

The clothes chute at Eugene's house was unique. It stretched from the second floor all the way to the basement. You could drop dirty clothes into the doors on the first and second floor and they would fall through a metal chute to a wooden box that hung from the ceiling in the

basement. His mom could then remove them and place them quickly into the washing machine. To the boys, it was a wonder in engineering.

“Wouldn’t you get hurt?” Jake asking a hypothetical question as he took his turn sticking his head into the opening.

“How could I get hurt? I would just land on the clothes. No big deal. You could even open the door on the first floor and watch me go by. I can even say hi on the way down!”

Jake listened intently, thought about it for a tenth of a second, and admitted he couldn’t really see a flaw in the plan. “Cool.”

Stanley, on the other hand, sensed a repeat of the pigeon adventure. Maybe even worse. He looked around wondering if it might just be better to run now and be ahead of the game...

Jake and Stanley waited in front of the open door of the chute on the first floor while Eugene sprinted up the stairs to the second-floor. When he opened the door to the chute upstairs, he shouted down to Jake, “Can you hear me?”

Jake stuck his head in the lower portal and looking up, shouted back, “Yep! I can see you too!”

“Ok. I’m getting in!” “Are you ready?”

Jake stepped back and yelled, “We’re ready!”

He and Stanley waited in anticipation as they heard Eugene squeezing through the narrow opening and into the tight metal chute.

“OK, here I come!”

The boys would later consider those words an understatement, as what followed could best be described as an extended scream. Jake was shocked at how fast a person could go past a small opening. Eugene went past in a blur...just a whoosh, really; only to be followed by a loud crash as the wooden clothes hamper in the basement exploded into a million pieces. Jake turned wide-eyed to say something but Stanley was already running for the door.

Jake paused a second. leaned his head in the opening and looked down into the basement. He called quietly in a tentative whisper. “Eugene...?”

Jets roared overhead as they made their final approach into Miami International Airport. It was nineteen eighty-eight and the national news outlets were now calling Miami the front line of the drug war. The television show *Miami Vice* was making all of it seem quite glamorous. In truth, it was not. Colombians were killing Jamaicans and Jamaicans were killing Cubans...and they

were all killing anyone else who got in their way, including police officers. It was all being done in order to corner the billion-dollar drug market that was headquartered in south Florida.

Lt Kaminski sat in the back of the Blackhawk surveillance van listening intently to the body-bug worn by his undercover agent. The undercover and his partner were meeting with a bad guy from Medellin, a city in Colombia that was now being referred to as the “belly of the beast”. It was the headquarters of the powerful Medellin Cartel, with tentacles that reached into every corner of the United States.

This was a big meeting. Jake’s team was spread all over the neighborhood in undercover cars and on rooftops. He hated the location, but these Colombians loved to do business near the airport. They knew the cops couldn’t put up helicopters or planes to conduct surveillance due to the jet traffic. Jake looked across at his number two, Marco Romero, a tough-as-nails sergeant who had grown up in Little Havana; his parents coming over in the late fifties when Castro had won his revolution. The man was steady as a rock. Nothing could shake him. He’d been with Jake since the unit was formed four years ago. They had been through it all together and were more like brothers than lieutenant and sergeant.

Jake looked over at his tech guy. “Frank, how’s the bug?”

The tech signaled silently with a thumbs up.

“What do you think, Marco?” Jake just making small talk.

Marco, who was busy checking his Glock one last time, responded without looking up. “We’re looking good boss. Bug is working good and the bad guys are due any minute...*Todo esta bien.*” His voice and demeanor reassuring.

Romero watched his boss staring at the video screen, lost in thought. “What’s bugging you, boss?”

Jake hesitated a bit, then answered. “I’m still worried about these assholes. The informant said that everything was good, but these Colombians have been known to do counter-surveillance. I just worry they might decide to blow this whole thing up.”

Romero frowned in the low light of the tech truck. “Well, we could blow this thing off...”

Jake sat silently, weighing his options. This case had taken almost a year to get to this point. There had been meetings upon meetings. Each side doing a bit of give and take. Every meet had gone well. Today’s meeting was only to finalize the terms of the deal. *‘Maybe I’m just overthinking it.’*

“Well, the UCs (undercovers) and the informant think we’re good... I guess we have to go for it...” Jake was talking to himself more than anything.

Romero spoke reassuringly. “It’ll be fine boss. It’s nothing our guys haven’t done hundreds of times.”

Jake snorted quietly. “Yeah. Let’s just make sure everyone is ready to go.”

“Roger that.” Marco turned and issued some last-minute instructions to the tech guy on the monitor equipment.

Jake took a moment to think about his team. In his opinion, they were the best of the best. They lived, breathed and slept their jobs, often at the cost of their personal lives and even promotions. Many of them had one, maybe two ex-wives and kids who barely recognized them anymore. When he needed them, they were always there. If there were unseen victims of this so-called “drug war”, his people were among them. The politicians talked about this shit all day long but they went home safely to their wives and kids every night. His team didn’t have that luxury. Often forgotten by their families, they were all living half-lives. Most knew it was probably their own fault but realistically there was plenty of blame to go around. The job was unforgiving. *‘In truth, all we really have is each other...’*

Jake picked up his walkie and spoke to his team. “Ok people, look sharp. BG’s (cop talk for bad guys) are due in five. We have confirmation they’re coming in the black Mercedes. You’ve got the tag numbers on your briefing sheets. Remember, this is only a “meet and talk”. It should go fairly quickly. Just keep your heads down and stay invisible.”

Moments later the radio crackled, outer surveillance reporting. “They’re here. Just pulling into the parking lot of the Marriott now.” Two bad guys in the front seat...and it looks like one more in the back seat. We got a good eyeball boss.”

Jake acknowledged with a click. “Are our UCs in position?”

“Yeah, they’re at the pool. We have a visual.”

“Copy that.”

The “eyeball” reported. “Two of the bad guys are out of the car and walking over to the pool area. The third guy is staying in the back seat. Looks like he’s on his phone.”

Jake was trying to get a handle on the third bad guy. “Keep a close eye on the guy in the car. If he moves an inch I want to know.”

Another unit reported. “They’re at the pool. Shaking hands. Sitting down. Looks smooth...”

The next fifteen minutes went as planned. The Colombians seemed happy... *‘At least as happy as those motherfuckers could be...’* The body bug had confirmed that all was going well with the negotiations. It should be over soon... The radio came back to life. “They’re up. Looks like they’re walking to the parking lot to say their good-byes. The main bad guy is looking around, so everyone, stay cool.”

A few minutes passed and the Colombians were back in their car, slowly backing out and making their way to the exit.

A loud voice cut in on the radio. “Got a possible bad guy car coming into the parking lot. Looks like four guys...definitely Colombians. It’s a white BMW!”

Jake quickly commanded on the radio: “Heads up people...”

Suddenly shouting on the radio. “They’re gunned up boss! They’re shooters!”

There was no time to reply. The air came alive with gunshots; withering fire from automatic weapons. Three of the Colombians were firing from the moving vehicle, two of them hanging out of their windows and firing over the roof. Jake’s undercover was returning fire but one of them was already down. Two of Jake’s team were out of their car and firing rapidly while engaging the black Mercedes and the first group of Colombians. The driver of the black Mercedes was hit. The car came to a sudden stop. The bad guy from the back seat stepped outside and started firing back at the officers. He managed to get off two short bursts from his Mac 10 machine pistol before Romero shot him through the side of his head, disintegrating the man’s brain stem.

The white BMW was now racing toward the parking lot exit. Two of the Colombians appeared hit and out of action. The driver and the front seat passenger were the only two still in play. As they approached the exit, they faced the stalled black Mercedes and a uniform police car, which was blocking their access to the street. Two patrol officers began firing deadly shotgun slugs over the hood and trunk of their cruiser, perforating the windshield of the approaching car. The car veered the right and slammed into the black Mercedes. The shooting stopped, all of the Colombians dead on arrival.

The chaos ended as quickly as it had begun, nothing in the air but the acrid smell of spent gun powder. Jake was moving quickly, giving orders into his walkie as he ran. “We have at least two officers down. Get us fire rescue. Multiple units. Get a life-flight in the air asap.”

Sgt. Romero was on the ground leaning over one of the wounded undercover, the fallen officer lying face up on the hot asphalt. He was applying direct pressure to the man’s chest and talking gently to the man in Spanish at the same time. He looked up as Jake approached, slowly shaking his head. Jake mouthed the question. “And Gomez?” Romero shook his head once more.

Jake continued to move toward his sergeant but now seemingly in slow motion. The world had gone quiet. He couldn’t hear the approaching sirens or the shouts of his team as they secured what was left of the disaster. *‘What the fuck have I done?’* He looked down impotently at the radio in his hand, knowing there was nothing more to say to anyone who would be listening. He dropped the device on the pavement and sunk to the ground to hold the head of his undercover, determined to be there for the man’s last moments.

The lifeless figure now lay still between the two men. Romero looked over at his boss. He had never seen this haunted look on his face before. Something had broken. Something had broken that would not mend. The light in Jake Kaminski's eyes had gone out in that moment. Somehow, Romero knew it would never come back on again.

Eugene smiled, looking sideways at Jake and Stanley as the junkman counted out the change into his outstretched hand. A dollar-fifty in cold hard cash! They had spent an entire week collecting old newspapers and other assorted junk from every house in the neighborhood. This was followed by another day of bundling the papers and loading them onto two wagons to pull down to the junkyard.

An hour later the boys talked animatedly as they walked toward the Garfield Theater, arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. Two horror movies were showing today. A typical Saturday matinee. At least four hours of terror for twenty-five cents apiece. Plus, plenty of money left over for popcorn and Butterfinger candy bars.

"What's playing today?" Stanley posing the question.

"*Mr. Sardonicus* and *Premature Burial!*" Eugene pronouncing the titles dramatically, doing his best to scare everyone.

Jake interjected, "I heard that a guy gets buried alive!"

Stanley nervously, "Can that really happen?"

"In the old days it happened all the time...Not now!" Jake stated matter-of-factly.

Stanley thought about that for a while. "How come not now?"

Eugene put his hand on Stanley's shoulder, "Cause now they take out all of your blood before they bury you."

"Why do they do that?" Stanley thoroughly baffled.

"So you stay dead! Why do you think?" Eugene declared, convinced that this should be obvious to anyone.

"Oh." Stanley pondered what would be worse: your blood being sucked from your body or getting buried alive... Then tentatively, "You guys sure you wanna go to the movies?"

Jake and Eugene shared a smile. "Don't worry Stanley, it's just a movie. Besides, we're going to sneak up to the balcony. They have those seats on the side like President Lincoln sat in. We can sit up there and the usher won't see us!" Stanley was already worrying.

Jake was in the living room watching the Marlins game on the TV when the phone rang. It startled him, as sudden noises seemed to do these days. He hesitated answering. Who the hell would be calling me now? Hell, he'd been retired for over ten years. Nobody wanted to talk to him anymore... *'Probably a sales call...'* Seconds later the ringing stopped and he eased back into his chair. *'Thought so...'*

A minute later his cell phone began to ring. *'Can't be a coincidence.'* He picked it up and saw that it was Marco Romero, his old sergeant. He furled his brow, *'Marco never calls...'*

"Hello? Marco, is that you?"

Silence.

Once again more firmly, "Romero?"

A woman finally spoke. "Hello. Is this Jake Kaminski?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Is this Jake Kaminski from Miami PD?"

Jake replied, becoming annoyed. "Yeah, a long time ago. Who is this and why are you calling on Marco's phone?"

"Mr. Kaminski. This is Marco Romero's daughter Maria. You probably don't remember me..."
The girl let the statement hang in the air.

"What happened?", apprehension in Jake's voice.

Another long pause. The woman struggling. "My dad has passed away Mr. Kaminski. He left instructions to notify you."

"How?" The question cold and flat.

Another long pause. Nothing but silence on the line.

Jake spoke again. "Are you there?"

Slowly, "Yes I'm here. Her voice breaking. "Dad took his own life...A week ago. I'm sorry it took so long to contact you but we just found his instructions last night."

The phone was silent again. Finally, Jake hoarsely croaked, "Why? Why would he do that?"

“He was sick.” The woman struggled to keep from crying. “He had cancer. It came upon him suddenly three months ago. Pancreas. He was in a lot of pain. He had to take so much medicine...and then he barely knew who we were... I think he just got tired...”

Jake spoke again. “I didn’t know...” Jake could feel the guilt descending like a black cloud.

“I’m sorry Mr. Kaminski. I know that you guys were close. He did nothing but talk about you and all those funny stories about work. I think those were the best times of his life...”

Jake didn’t comment. He just sat there listening and staring into space.

“Mr. Kaminski?”

“I’m sorry... I’m here. I’m very sorry about this. Is there anything...?”

Maria interrupted, “No. Thank you. Dad took care of everything before he went. Just like always.” The girl was quiet for a long time and then Jake realized that she was quietly crying, finally surrendering to her grief. Jake was now remembering the little brown-haired girl who rode on her dad’s shoulders that day at Disney World...so long ago...a lifetime.

He said nothing. ‘*What could be said?*’ He just stayed on the line, listening and remembering... Remembering the strong man that had steadied him so many times. ‘*Jesus*’

After a time, Jake quietly hung up the phone and stared into space. He sat there a very long time, and then began to weep, sobbing so fiercely that his body shook to the soles of his feet.

The boys sat on the front porch at Jake’s house with a striking, dark-haired teenager named Barbara. She scribbled into a small notebook, practicing her shorthand by writing the words from songs that played on her transistor radio. Del Shannon’s song, *Runaway*, played loudly and the lyrics were magically appearing on the page in a script that neither Jake or Eugene could decipher. To the boys, it was like a secret code to which only Barbara had the key.

It was a warm summer night, almost nine-thirty. Late, but this was summer and there were no bedtimes. Jake’s dad was at his night job and the boys were under the marginal care of the babysitter. They hated that word-*babysitter*- and all that it implied. They weren’t babies! Of course, they fiercely maintained that she was really only there to take care of Jake’s younger brother, who was, in fact, a baby. For them, Barbara was more like an older sister. In truth, both had a crush on the sixteen-year-old beauty.

Eugene had stepped off the porch and was now throwing a tennis ball against the steps, jumping nimbly backwards as he caught the ball on the rebound.

“Can you do that?” Eugene challenging Jake.

“Yeah”. Jake jumped down from the steps to take up the dare. As he reached for the ball in his friend’s outstretched hand, he glanced up the street and paused. An old man was ambling slowly down the sidewalk, a metal bucket in one hand and a fishing pole in the other. His long bamboo pole stretched into the sky, swaying with each step he took.

“Here comes Mr. Hahn.” Jake announced while pointing toward the bus stop.

“Wonder what he caught.” Eugene turned to look, forgetting the tennis ball in his hand.

Jake looked back at Barbara. “Think he’s *sick* again tonight?”

Barbara gave Jake a warning look. “Jake...”

Jake looked down, chastised. “I know. I didn’t mean anything...”

Everyone knew that Mr. Hahn drank. Jake’s mom said *sick* was a kind way to talk about it. Truthfully, nobody really minded his “sickness”. Jake’s dad had sat down with the boys one afternoon and explained that Mr. Hahn’s son had been killed during World War II. He had been in the first wave of Marines at Iwo Jima and was now buried somewhere on that far-off island.

“Mr. Hahn just drinks when he remembers his son. It makes him sad.” Jake’s dad spoke quietly, rubbing his hand gently on his son’s back as he talked.

When the boys asked why he wasn’t buried at home like Nana, Jake’s dad had grown silent. After a few minutes he stood and patted the boys on the head and telling them that they just needed to be nice to Mr. Hahn. Jake had looked questioning at his father and asked him, “When will he stop being sad?”

“Jake, I’m afraid Mr. Hahn has a sadness that doesn’t go away.”

The boys exchanged looks, both wondering what kind of sadness that could be.

As the old man drew closer, the boys could see him clearly. His wrinkled visage looked out from under a faded brown fedora, tilted jauntily on his wizened head. Nobody was certain of his exact age but Eugene speculated that he had to be at least a hundred years old. “Or even more!” he had pronounced during one of their heated debates.

Pulling even with Barbara and the boys, the old man set his bucket down and theatrically removed his hat to perform a slight bow. “Miss Barbara, how are you this fine evening?”

She waved airily with her fingers and smiled back. “I’m just fine Mr. Hahn. Did you catch anything?”

“Nothing to brag about today. But tomorrow is just around the corner.”, the man smiling kindly.

“Would you like the boys to help you with the bucket?”

Mr. Hahn replaced his hat and grinned. “No, I’ll be fine, but thank you all the same.”

The bent figure then reached down, picked up the bucket and resumed his slow journey toward his own porch. As the old man faded into the yellow street light, Eugene was the first to see her.

“Here she comes!” Both boys launched from the steps simultaneously.

Jake’s mom was rounding the corner, coming home from her evening job at the A&P. She still wore her uniform, and tonight carried a bag of groceries. The boys raced to meet the slender young woman coming up the street. It was only three blocks home from the store and she enjoyed the walk. She also knew that she would be met by the boys as soon as she turned the last corner. It had become a ritual. They would rush to her side, take her bags, and walk eagerly with her the rest of the way. How she loved that last block. The boys would clamor for her attention, recounting their adventures from the day and asking her countless questions, mostly to settle some bet between themselves. Every debate between the two always seeming to end with a demand from Eugene, “Ask your ma!”

“Boys, slow down. You’re like two wildcats! Don’t fight over the bag. You don’t want to tear it. Especially tonight.”

Jake looked knowingly at Eugene with a smile. They had been hoping all day...

“What did you bring, chocolate or vanilla?” Jake smiling conspiratorially at Eugene.

“You’ll see. But I think it will be perfect for a hot summer night. So, tell me what you two have been up to all day...One at a time please.” She smiled tenderly as the boys broke into story after story, both competing to tell the best version of events and both holding fast to her hands as they pulled her gently home.

Jake lay asleep on the couch. His once dark hair mostly gray now. His body was still relatively thin, somehow having avoided the mid-life spread common in men his age. The flickering grey light from the television illuminated the room in an eerie glow. He slept like this most nights, unable to fall asleep without the white noise of the set. He just couldn’t face going into the bedroom to an empty bed. Nothing but loneliness in that room.

Suddenly he awoke in a panic. He couldn’t breathe. Nothing. He bolted to his feet. He was choking. He struggled to catch a breath but his throat felt like it was closing. He moved frantically about the room, struggling to catch his breath and wheezing desperately. He struggled to remain calm but to no avail.

Five minutes later he was bent over the bathroom sink, his breathing almost back to normal. He raised his head and looked into the mirror. ‘*Jesus.*’ A tired, unrecognizable face looked back at him. He opened a drawer, grabbed a cloth and wet it with warm water. He ran it slowly over his

head and face. He backed up and sat down on the edge of the tub, sighing audibly as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

He'd been dreaming again. Didn't even remember what it was. Something bad, or maybe something foolish. It didn't matter. Truth is, he was always more tired when he woke up than when he went to bed. Out in the hallway, the silent apartment waited like a grim reminder of how empty his life had become. Nobody home. Nobody ever home. At least not since Kate had passed. His heart ached as he remembered how she used to sit on the tub next to him when this had happened. She had been worried and soothing at the same time. She would rub his back gently, trying in her own way to protect him from the ghosts that haunted him in the night.

He finally let out a prolonged sigh and shook his head, upset with himself for being so foolish. He pushed off the tub and stood shakily. "How long am I going to do this...living in the past...? That was then. This is now. Kate was gone. She had slipped from this life with a brain tumor just months after his retirement. Hell, that had been almost twelve years ago. There had been no trips to Paris or anywhere else that she had dreamed about. Life had somehow gotten in the way. Long hours, shift work. He had been gone more than he was home. She had never complained, even though he had basically left her to raise the kids alone. He thought about all of the promises broken, the vacations not taken. He looked in the mirror with disgust. *'What a fucking mess I made of things...'*

He walked into the kitchen looking aimlessly around the room. A CNN commentator was busy scaring the audience with "breaking news". He was shaking his head in disbelief when he noticed the answering machine blinking, a flashing intrusion from the world outside. He walked over, absently pushed the playback button and turned back to the sink to pour some water into the coffee maker. A loud beep sounded and he heard the voice of his oldest daughter on the machine.

"Dad, this is Nina. Sorry its been awhile, but Tom and the kids have been keeping me running. Just checking in. All good here...work sucks, but what's new." Then silence...a long pause. She was weighing her options... "I was wondering if you would want to go to the cemetery with the girls and I this Saturday..." Another long pause, then, "Are you there, Dad?"

Jake could hear his granddaughters in the background as Nina waited on the phone. He closed his eyes. Another failure. *'Those kids barely know me.'*

Nina was talking again. "Well, anyway...call when you get a chance. Luv you."

Jake plugged in the coffee maker and then disconnected the answering machine with a sharp pull of the cord, shaking his head as he walked into the living room. His thoughts went back to Marco. *'How had he done it? He had done his job and kept his family close. His kids worshiped the ground he walked on. Somehow he had found the time for them.'* He thought about his own girls. They went through the motions but the time between their visits had grown exponentially since Kate had passed. He suspected that they harbored resentment for his neglect. His neglect of Kate more than anything. They had seen her loneliness firsthand, their empathy

growing as they moved into womanhood. As for him, he had been oblivious to it all. 'Clueless?' He shook his head again. *'No... selfish!'*

He glanced at the sideboard as he moved through the hallway, noticing the photo album still resting where Kate had placed it so many years ago. He picked it up and sat down in an old wingback chair. He opened the pages, flipping slowly back through the tracks of his life... his family's life. Halfway through the album, the photos turned to faded color snapshots and then eventually to much clearer black and whites. His breathing slowed. Almost stopped. He hadn't seen these photos in forty years or more.

Jake's dad looked out from one page; his Navy uniform worn proudly. The photo taken at Great Lakes Naval Station just before he shipped out to the Pacific. Next, his mom sat on a porch rail of a long-forgotten row house, as pretty as a movie star. *'Did they really look like this?'* He turned the pages and more memories flooded from the celluloids.

Jake paused. His hands frozen in place. In the center of the page was one photo, taken in his backyard. There they were, Eugene, Stanley, Jake, his dad, and even his mom. They were posing proudly in front of the finished pigeon coop. Stanley was tenderly holding their little black feathered prize from so long ago. Eugene and Jake had their arms around Stanley, protecting their little friend and the bird at the same time. Jake's eyes continued to moisten until he could no longer focus on the memory come to life. He sat there for what felt like an eternity, trying to capture the moment and hold it, squeeze it so hard it would come back to life. Finally, he gently closed the album, as if tenderly protecting the loved ones inside. *'What had happened to that life? How had he become so lost?'*

He remembered the coffee machine. It must be ready. He stood and headed back to the kitchen, carrying the album tenderly under his arm. He reached up with his right hand to rub his chest and his shoulder. *'Fuck, everything hurts. Next time I'm at the doc, I'm going to tell him...for sure this time...Must be some pill he can give me...'*

The summer of sixty-three had arrived. The last few weeks of school had seemed more like months. Jake and Eugene had spent every free moment in anticipation of summer vacation. They had worked feverishly each night to finish their final book report for the semester. They had also helped Stanley with his multiplication tables, knowing he would need them in order to get out of third grade.

Another boy had joined their ranks during the school year. Gus. His dad was the new fourth grade teacher and they had bought a house three doors down from Eugene's house. Gus was a skinny, serious type who was continuously analyzing everything...a real thinker. Nothing escaped his scrutiny. He could name stars, constellations, types of trees, and even what kind of birds were in the neighborhood. He was able to take the most complex occurrence and deduce why it had happened. Unfortunately, he had met his match in his new friends, because almost everything they did defied logic.

The neighborhood had also changed during the past school year. The city was building a freeway that would cut directly through the heart of their idyllic world. They had already torn down the neighborhood library, a movie theater and even Mr. Kaminski's favorite barber shop. During this process, the boys spent every Saturday transfixed, as huge metal wrecking balls smashed into the walls of the old brick buildings, levelling a big part of the only world they had ever known. They watched as the bulldozers and cement trucks laid down the shiny new motorway. It was all pretty cool, but even at their young age, they could recognize that something was changing forever.

The boys met in front of Jake's house. All of them stood astride their bicycles, leaning on their handlebars, wiggling their front tires back and forth as they debated how to spend this first day of summer vacation.

Stanley was the first to speak up. "Why don't we go down to the sporting goods store and look at the Mynah bird. Maybe we can get him to talk!"

"Nah... We always do that. Besides the guy who works there always tells us to buy something. Plus, the only thing that bird ever says is "hello". Jake looked, as always, to Eugene for support.

Just then Gus came racing up on his blue Schwinn, braking hard enough to put his rear wheel into a slide. "Hi guys! What's up?"

Stanley quickly responded. "How'd you do that Gus? That was cool."

"It's easy. Just go real fast and then when you're ready, turn the handlebars and slam on the brakes. The rest sort of just happens."

Eugene looked seriously at Stanley. "Just be careful. Your ma will kill us if you fall down and scrape your legs up like the last time."

Stanley just smiled shyly.

Gus asked again. "What are you guys gonna do?"

"We don't know yet. Maybe ride our bikes on the new freeway before it opens." Jake was sounding out another possibility.

Gus looked across the street to where the freeway was being built. "Yeah, that would be cool. How about making a go-cart instead?"

"A go-cart? With a motor?" Eugene was skeptical.

"Yeah. My dad has an old lawn mower with a motor that he said we could have if we want it." Gus looked at the group, knowing he had their interest.

"Jake interjected quickly. "Does it work? The motor, I mean. Does it work?"

Gus nodded enthusiastically. “Yep. It works good. All we have to do is take it off and put it on our go-cart.”

Eugene commented dryly. “Only one problem, we don’t got a go-cart.”

Now that Gus knew that he had their attention, he pulled a small notebook from the back pocket of his blue jeans. He searched determinedly in his front right pocket and came out with a short pencil. “I drew a diagram of how we could build it. We just need some boards and nails and stuff. It would be easy.”

The boys were now exchanging looks, smiling, knowing that this was going to be a great summer.

Three weeks later the boys stood in the driveway outside of Gus’s garage. They were admiring their masterpiece. It hadn’t been easy, that’s for sure. They had raided all of their garages for parts. Lumber from Jake’s place, baby buggy wheels from Stanley’s house, even though his mother fussed the entire time, worried about what they were up to and if it was dangerous.

“Stanley, you be careful. Do you hear me?”

“Don’t worry Mrs. Gregory, we’ll watch out for him.” Jake using his most serious tone.

Stanley’s mom replied with a rueful smile. “That’s what I’m afraid of...” She winked mischievously, then became serious. “I’m serious. You boys be careful.” Her finger wagging good-naturedly at all of the boys.

“Yes ma’am.” Eugene solemnly replied. “I’ll watch out for him.” All the boys nodded vigorously in agreement.

They had faced a few obstacles along the way. To begin with, they couldn’t find a steering wheel. This had been a real problem. “How can we drive it if we can’t steer it?” Jake asked matter-of-factly.

Eugene thought long and hard on it before responding. “Easy. We use a rope! All we have to do is tie one end on one wheel and the other end on the other wheel. Then we just pull it back and forth to turn the wheels!”

All of the boys looked at each other. Then they turned to Gus. “Can we do it?”

Gus, reacting as if he had been asked about the possibility of reaching the moon, replied. “Theoretically, I think it would work. Of course, we would have to calculate the exact length of the rope and make sure we have a place to put our feet. If we do it correctly, we could push the wheels with our feet to help with the rope.”

That was all it took. Gus had spoken. In their group, anyone who carried a pencil and a notebook was an authority. They quickly went to work to finish the job.

A few days later, the four boys were gathered in Gus' driveway admiring their masterpiece. It was finished. They were speechless. A rare occurrence. Their faces and arms were covered in grease. They wore it like badges of honor. Gus was smiling knowingly, his father's gasoline can at his feet. Eugene stood with his hands on his hips and a greasy rag draped over his shoulder. Jake, standing at Eugene's side, was beaming with pride and Stanley fidgeted restlessly at the front of the cart, now wishing that he had put more grease on his face to look like the other guys. It was a moment none of them wanted to end.

Finally, Jake couldn't stand it. He had to sit in the finished product. He put his feet up on the boards that held the front wheels, pulling the rope and pushing the front wheels back and forth. "It works great!"

Stanley was the first to ask the obvious question. "Where we gonna try it out?"

The boys looked questioningly at each other, all of them shrugging in unison.

Eugene made the declaration. "Let's just try it out on the sidewalk the first time. If it works, we can go to the playground...Maybe even try it out on the freeway before it opens!"

"Who goes first?" Jake asked hopefully.

A furious discussion ensued, the final outcome determined by a scientific application of '*eeny, meeny, miney moe...*' Gus won and was to be the test pilot. Everyone agreed that he was the best choice anyway. After all, it was *his* idea...and his motor!

Eugene grabbed the starter rope of the Briggs and Stratton engine, now gleaming brightly in the sun. Three pulls and the motor sprang to life. The drive mechanism consisted of an old fan belt attached to a lever that rested on a series of hooks behind the driver. Theoretically, if the driver wanted to go faster, he just reached behind his right shoulder and pulled the fan belt tighter. They all agreed it was a sound principle.

The boys pushed the cart out onto the sidewalk. Gus nestled himself into the "cockpit", grabbed the steering rope, and took on the look of a seasoned race driver. He ceremoniously reached over his shoulder and pulled up on the lever, tightening the fan belt and engaging the engine. Suddenly, the cart came to life, leaping forward much faster than anybody had envisioned.

Shouts of joy erupted from the boys. "Look at him go!" Stanley shouted enthusiastically.

"Man! He's not even trying to go fast yet!" Eugene beaming at Jake.

Jake watched intently as Gus reached back and tightened the fan belt a bit more. The lever was now on the second hook. The cart responded by gaining speed immediately. "Now he's really flying!"

Stanley quietly wondered aloud. “He’s gonna have to slow down when he gets to the end of the block. The curb’s pretty high...”

“Yeah...” Jake agreed, still caught up in their success.

Stanley posed a question timidly. “How’s he gonna stop?”

Jake and Eugene exchanged a quick look, the thought hitting them simultaneously.

“We forgot about the brakes!” Eugene, eyes wide, starting sprinting after Gus and the runaway cart. “Gus...!”

Now Jake was running and screaming too. “Gus! Jump!”

Stanley wondered how just much trouble they were in this time...

Jake stepped from the terminal of the Milwaukee airport and took a deep breath. Did it really smell like home or was it all in his mind? It had been over forty years since he had left this place. The air was cool but the sun was warm. Typical late summer day. He remembered that Lake Michigan always acted as a giant air-conditioner for the city. He walked over to the rental car lot, picked up his Ford Focus and headed out into a city that held memories from a different time and place. A past so sweet that it pained him to think of it now.

The pre-set on the radio was tuned to CNN. The commentator was still scaring the audience with “breaking news”. *‘My God!’*. He rolled his eyes and switched the radio to the satellite fifties station. Ricky Nelson was singing *Its Up to You*. He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. *‘Perfect...’*

He followed the instructions from the GPS as he worked his way through the heavy traffic on the freeway. He cringed a bit as he tried to get comfortable in his seat. His chest was hurting him again. *‘This heartburn is getting worse. I should’ve eaten something on the plane. I guess I’ll see the doc when I get back home.’*, knowing he would never do it. He decided he would stop at the first gas station to buy a coke. *‘He just needed a good belch.’*

Exiting the freeway at North Avenue he turned instinctively toward the river. A flood of memories washed over him. Nothing had changed...Well, maybe it had, but it felt like he had driven twenty minutes and traveled fifty years.

Jake crossed the North Avenue bridge, remembering that day so long ago. He strained to look over the railing, wondering if it was really as high as he remembered. Reaching the end of the bridge he slowed as much as traffic would allow. He could almost see Eugene, his dad and Stanley walking along the street, all of them fussing over that hapless pigeon! His fingers gripped the wheel tightly, his eyes blinking rapidly, suddenly blurring with moisture as a flood of

emotions swept over him. The sudden sound of a horn behind him prodded him to move along. He waved gently in the rear-view mirror and drove on.

He brushed away the moisture from his cheeks while working his way back toward his old neighborhood. He told himself that he needed to get a grip. While this world seemed the same, he was not. He had moved to Miami long ago and never looked back. His job had become his life, telling himself that what he did was important. He had let his new life separate him from his past...from his friends...from this place that had nurtured him so long ago. He had even lost contact with Eugene somewhere along the way, too busy chasing bad guys and thinking about himself. *'How did I ever let that happen?'*

Jake's mind began to wonder back in time to a day he would never forget. It was about twenty years ago. He had been about forty years old. The kids were in college. He had finally decided to try to find his long-lost friend. Sadly, his search had not ended well. He had learned that Eugene had died tragically in a car accident at the tender age of twenty-one. So long ago. Jake had lived his life just assuming that Eugene was still alive and that one day they would see each other again. 'What had he been thinking?' It wasn't like he had never thought about him. He had told "Eugene stories" to his wife and kids over and over through the years. 'Hell, the kids could tell the stories better than he could.' To him it just didn't seem real. How could he have been dead all those years. He had been so alive in the telling of the stories...

Back in the present, Jake shook his head sadly. He then spoke quietly to the empty car...or maybe to Eugene. "Hell, you were gone before Katie and I even got married...and long gone before the girls came along." He paused, waiting to make a left turn and then added, "I'm so sorry my friend. So sorry."

His thoughts back in the present, Jake continued driving through the world of his childhood. He marveled at the business district, its old brick buildings still looking much the same as they did when he was young. Amazingly, the old Garfield Theater was still standing, though it was now apparently a church. A few blocks later he noticed that the A&P was gone but some other grocery chain had moved into the same building. It was unbelievable. It was as if his childhood world had somehow been magically preserved in amber.

Jake rolled down the windows of the Focus as he finally turned onto his old street. He wanted to breathe it all in. His first sight was the big red-brick schoolhouse, still a majestic fortress presiding over the neighborhood. The playground that surrounded it was quiet; a few boys playing pickup basketball and some girls jumping rope close to the school entrance.

He continued cruising up the street, driving as slowly as possible. He was amazed at how much it looked the same...maybe a bit smaller but still the same. He eased the rental to the right and came to a stop at the curb in front of his old porch. He instinctively looked next-door to Eugene's old house. The wishing well was gone. Probably long ago. Across the street, the drug store was gone as well, replaced by a second-hand clothing store. His indigestion continued to plague him. His chest was still tight, even after chugging down the Pepsi. Usually he would be able to belch out the problem within minutes...He just leaned back and decided to wait for the relief to come. He was certainly in no hurry.

Jake's thoughts were interrupted by a voice calling his name. *'His name?'* He shook his head. There was nobody in sight. The voice, that of a young woman, sounded familiar. He wrinkled his brow, *'What the hell are you doing now, hearing things?'*

His heartburn was easing up as Jake stepped from his car. He stood on the sidewalk in front of his old house. He heard a car door slam and looked across the street. A man was getting out of a 1953 Oldsmobile and entering Ketter's Drug Store. *'What the hell?'* He blinked and all that he saw was the second-hand clothing store. No car.

"What you doing mister?" a child's voice.

Startled, Jake turned back to see an eight-year old black girl standing in his old yard under the chestnut tree.

"Oh, hello miss. How are you?" Jake doing his best to put the girl at ease. He was sure that it wasn't every day that a middle-aged white man stood in front of her house. "I used to live here... A long time ago."

A voice came from the side of the house. A twenty-something woman with honey blonde hair was standing at the side door, broom in hand as she tidied up the stoop. At the same time, he heard what he could swear was the voice of Patsy Cline singing 'Crazy' coming through the front window screen of the house. *'Had that window been open seconds ago?'* He took a closer look at the woman as she put up her broom and went inside. He stepped back, his knees buckling a bit. He glanced down at the curb, worrying about falling.

Looking up again, he said to the girl, "Did you see that woman?" pointing to the side of the house.

The girl turned her head quickly and then turned back to Jake, "See what woman?"

"The white woman with the broom." Jake knew he was sounding crazy.

Concern, maybe a little fear, crossed the girls face, "Mister, you ain't supposed to be here. I'm gonna have to call my momma." The girl took a step back and was now looking warily at the man in front of her.

"No, it's ok. I must have made a mistake. You see, I used to live here...in your house." Jake trying not to scare the poor kid.

"I don't care mister, you can't stay here in front of the house like this. You look kinda sick."

Jake was shaking his head. "No, I'm ok. I'm just a little tired. I have this indigestion. That's all." His legs felt shaky as he tried to reassure the young girl.

Jake heard a voice come from the back of the house. A lean, dark man was coming around to the side of the house with a paintbrush and an old coffee can of paint. He stopped at the side door and yelled through the screen door, "Felicija, could you come out back for second?"

Jake fell to the sidewalk, catching himself before his head hit the ground. The girl rushed forward; her trepidation gone. "Mister, you sick. I'm gonna get my momma. She'll know what to do."

"No, it's ok. It's just a bit of indigestion."

The girl ran quickly up the front stairs and into the house. Jake tried to focus his eyes on the man with the coffee can...and then the woman who had come back outside. He whispered quietly while reaching out his right hand, "Ma?"

Moments later the girl returned to the sidewalk with her mother, who was already crouching over Jake. He vaguely noticed her white uniform.

"Sir. Can you hear me? My name is Rose. I'm a nurse. My daughter is Tanya, the girl you've been talking to. Can you understand me?"

Jake looked up at Rose, bewildered, ignoring her question, "Did you see that man and woman in the driveway?"

Rose looked over her shoulder and then told her daughter, "Call 911 baby. Tell them to hurry."

Jake closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them again. He couldn't figure this out. One minute they were there and the next, nothing. *'What was happening?'* He looked up at Rose, "Ma'am, I'm a police officer...or I was...I'm retired."

"What's your name sir?"

"Jake. Jake Kaminski. I used to live here. In this very house. I just came back to see it. I needed to..." His thought seemed to get lost midway.

"Ok. I want you to just lay back now. I've called for some help."

Jake hesitated for a moment, pushing back a bit against her hands, not wanting to lie down. He looked imploringly at Rose. "This was such a happy place..."

Rose gently brushed his hair back from his face. There was something unsettling about him. *'Otherworldly...'*

Suddenly the man's eyes opened wide. He spoke into the air. He was looking past Rose at the empty sidewalk. "What are you doing here? You can't be here."

Rose put her hand on Jake's shoulder to calm him. "It's ok Mr. Kaminski. You need to take it easy. Just lay back for a while."

Again, Jake spoke to the empty sidewalk. "But you're gone! Everyone's gone. The wishing well is gone too..."

"Mr. Kaminski, who are you talking to?" Rose kept listening for the sound of the ambulance.

Jake didn't answer her, but spoke again into the air. "Are you ok? I heard what happened. I visit you when I heard about it. I left my dog tags at your grave." Tears were now running down his face.

Rose quietly, "Oh sweet Lord."

She watched as the man's face started to change. Relaxing somehow. A look of joy, peace, something good.

Jake addressed Rose. "Why is this happening? I just saw my ma. My dad too..." Jake's voice sounded different now.

The vision now spoke again to Jake. "It's ok. It's all ok now." a warm smile on the face of an eight-year-old boy, *almost nine*, looking straight into Jake's eyes.

Jake was now talking animatedly. "Eugene. What happened? You're back like before, still a kid. Am I dead or something?"

His friend didn't answer but reached out with his right hand. Jake looked to his left. Eugene's house looked new again. His dad's aqua '59 Chevy truck was in the driveway.

"It's ok Jakey. You can come with me now. I hear the Garfield is showing two movies this afternoon. Both for only twenty-five cents. My ma gave me two quarters." He reached even closer to grab Jake's hand. "Really, it's ok."

Jake looked back at Rose. He could hear the sirens approaching. The girl had come back to join her mom. He looked up at the woman, a look of gratitude on his face. She smiled back.

"My best friend wants me to go...", his look questioning.

Rose didn't know why, but she smiled again. She placed both her hands under his shoulders, easing him gently back to the ground. She then nodded and reached for his hand, clasping it tightly as she closed her eyes to hold back the tears.

Jake reached out to Eugene, who pulled him up from the sidewalk. An eight-year-old Jake stood. He grabbed his friend and held him with all his might. Eugene smiled over Jake's shoulder. "Hey, none of that sissy stuff. We got things to do. Stanley has been waiting for you for a long time...and his ma *still* wants us to look after him..."

Jake was looking around in wonder, “What about Gus?”

“He’s not here yet. He’ll be along one day. Heck, we’ve been waiting for *you* forever!”

Jake finally released his best friend. He looked around him. His rental car was gone. In fact, every trace of his adult world was gone. The air was sweet again. The sun felt warm on his skin.

Rose sat on the curb, cradling the dead man in her lap. Her daughter spoke quietly, “What happened to him *momma*?”

“He passed baby. He passed...” Rose looking wistfully into space.

“What was he doing here?”

“Child, I think he just wanted to go home...”

“Is he in heaven *Mama*? The girl looking down at the man worriedly.

“Yes child, he’s home. I heard him go.”

Unseen by Rose and her daughter, Eugene shoved Jake gently on the shoulder, “What do you wanna do? We got all the time in the world.”

Jake hesitated for a second, “Let’s water those flowers in the wishing well,” both boys sprinting, the wind in their faces...forever.