

To the real Kevin, and the real Gwen,  
with love.

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ISBN 0-590-47413-8

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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# 1. The Unvanquished Truth

I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that's the truth, the whole truth. The unvanquished truth, is how Freak would say it, and for a long time it was him who did the talking. Except I had a way of saying things with my fists and my feet even before we became Freak the Mighty, slaying dragons and fools and walking high above the world.

Called me Kicker for a time — this was day care, the year Gram and Grim took me over — and I had a thing about booting anyone who dared to touch me. Because they were *always* trying to throw a hug on me, like it was a medicine I needed.

Gram and Grim, bless their pointed little heads, they're my mother's people, *her* parents, and they figured whoa! better put this little critter with other little critters his own age, maybe it will improve his temper.

Yeah, right! Instead, what happened, I in-



vented games like kick-boxing and kick-knees and kick-faces and kick-teachers, and kick-the-other-little-day-care-critters, because I knew what a rotten lie that hug stuff was. Oh, I *knew*.

That's when I got my first look at Freak, that year of the phony hugs. He didn't look so different back then, we were all of us pretty small, right? But he wasn't in the playroom with us every day, just now and then he'd show up. Looking sort of fierce, is how I remember him. Except later it was Freak himself who taught me that remembering is a great invention of the mind, and if you try hard enough you can remember anything, whether it really happened or not.

So maybe he wasn't really all *that* fierce in day care, except I'm pretty sure he did hit a kid with his crutch once, whacked the little brat pretty good. And for some reason little Kicker never got around to kicking little Freak.

Maybe it was those crutches kept me from lashing out at him, man those crutches were cool. I wanted a pair for myself. And when little Freak showed up one day with these shiny braces strapped to his crooked legs, metal tubes right up to his hips, why those were even *more* cool than crutches.

"I'm Robot Man," little Freak would go, making these weird robot noises as he humped himself around the playground. *Rrrr . . . rrrr . . . rrrr . . .* like he had robot motors inside his legs, going *rrrrr . . . rrrr . . . rrrr*, and this look, like

don't mess with me, man, maybe I got a laser cannon hidden inside these leg braces, smoke a hole right through you. No question, Freak was hooked on robots even back then, this little guy two feet tall, and already he knew what he wanted.

Then for a long time I never saw Freak anymore, one day he just never came back to day care, and the next thing I remember I'm like in the third grade or something and I catch a glimpse of this yellow-haired kid scowling at me from one of those cripple vans. Man, they were death-ray eyes, and I think, hey, that's him, the robot boy, and it was like *whoa!* because I'd forgotten all about him, day care was a blank place in my head, and nobody had called me Kicker for a long time.

Mad Max they were calling me, or Max Factor, or this one butthead in L.D. class called me Maxi Pad, until I persuaded him otherwise. Gram and Grim always called me Maxwell, though, which is supposed to be my real name, and sometimes I hated that worst of all. Maxwell, ugh.

Grim out in the kitchen one night, after supper whispering to Gram had she noticed how much Maxwell was getting to look like *Him*? Which is the way he always talked about my father, who had married his dear departed daughter and produced, eek eek, Maxwell. Grim never says my father's name, just *Him*, like his name is too scary to say.

It's more than just the way Maxwell resembles



him, Grim says that night in the kitchen, the boy is *like* him, we'd better watch out, you never know what he might do while we're sleeping. Like his father did. And Gram right away shushes him and says don't ever say that, because little pictures have big ears, which makes me run to the mirror to see if it is my big ears made me look like *Him*.

What a butthead, huh?

Well, I *was* a butthead, because like I said, I never had a brain until Freak moved down the street. The summer before eighth grade, right? That's the summer I grew so fast that Grim said we'd best let the boy go barefoot, he's exploding out of his shoes. That barefoot summer when I fell down a lot, and the weirdo robot boy with his white-yellow hair and his weird fierce eyes moved into the duplex down the block with his beautiful brown-haired mom, the Fair Gwen of Air.

Only a falling-down goon would think that was her real name, right?

Like I said.

Are you paying attention here? Because you don't even know yet how we got to be Freak the Mighty. Which was pretty cool, even if I do say so myself.

## 2.

### *Up from the Down Under*

That summer, let's see, I'm still living in the basement, my own private down under, in the little room Grim built for me there. Glued up this cheap paneling, right? It sort of buckles away from the concrete cellar walls, a regular ripple effect, but do I complain about the crummy paneling, or the rug that smells like low tide? I do not. Because I *like* it in the down under, got the place all to myself and no fear of Gram sticking her head in the door and saying Maxwell dear, what *are* you doing?

Not that I ever *do* much of anything. Grim has it fixed in his head I'm at a dangerous age and they need to keep me under observation. Like I might make bombs or start a fire. Or whack out the local pets with my trusty slingshot or whatever — except I never *had* a slingshot, it was Grim who had one when he was my age. The proof is right there in the family photo album. You can see this blurry little miniature Grim with no front teeth, grinning at the camera and yank-



ing back on this prehistoric slingshot. Good for whacking mastodons, probably. "Just proper targets," Grim says, closing up the photo album, end of discussion. Like, oops, better hide the evidence. Don't want to give the dangerous boy any ideas.

Not that I *have* any ideas. My brain is vacant, okay? I'm just this critter hiding out in the basement, drooling in my comic books or whatever. All right, I never actually *drool*, but you get the picture.

Anyhow, this is the first day of July, already counting down for the Fourth and wondering where can I get an M80, which is supposed to have the explosive power of a quarter stick of dynamite or something, and when it goes off your heart thuds to a stop for a microsecond, *wham*. Which is probably what Grim is afraid of, eek eek, Maxwell armed with dynamite.

So finally I get bored in the down under and I'm hanging out in the so-called back yard, your basic chunk of chain-link heaven. Grim keeps this crummy little mower in the shed, but what's the point of mowing dirt, right? Okay, I'm out there messing around and that's when I see the moving van. Not your mainstream, nationwide, brand-name mover, either, just some cheapo local outfit. These big bearded dudes in their sweaty undershirts lugging stuff into the duplex half that's been vacant since last Christmas, when the dope fiend who lived there finally got busted.

At first I'm thinking the dope fiend is back, he's out of jail or whatever, and he's moving his stuff back in. Then I see the Fair Gwen. Not that I knew her name, that was a little while later. At first she's a glimpse, caught her going between the van and the front door, talking to the beards. I'm thinking, *hey I know her*, and then I'm thinking, *no way, butthead, no way you'd know a female that beautiful*.

Because she looks like some kind of movie star. Wearing these old jeans and a baggy T-shirt, and her long hair is tied back and she's probably sweating, but she *still* looks like a movie star. Like she has this glow, a secret spotlight that follows her around and makes her eyes light up.

And I'm thinking, well *this* improves the old neighborhood. You're thinking, yeah right, the goon is barely out of seventh grade, who does he think he is? All I'm saying, the Fair Gwen had star quality, and even a total moron can see it. And the reason she looked familiar is, I must have seen her bringing Freak to day care, way back in the dark ages, because the next thing I notice is this crippled-up yellow-haired midget kid strutting around the sidewalk, giving orders to the beards.

He's going: "Hey you, Doofus! Yeah, you with the hairy face, take it easy with that box. That box contains a computer, you know what a computer is?"

I can't believe it. By then I'm sneaking along



the street to see what's going on, and there's this weird-looking little dude, he's got a normal-sized head, but the rest of him is shorter than a yardstick and kind of twisted in a way that means he can't stand up straight and makes his chest puff out, and he's waving his crutches around and yelling up at the movers.

"Hey, Gwen," one of the beards says, "can't you give this kid a pill or something? He's driving us nuts."

So Gwen comes out of the house and pushes the hair out of her big brown eyes and she goes, "Kevin, go play in the back yard, okay?"

"But my computer."

"Your computer is fine. Leave the men alone. They'll be done soon and then we can have lunch."

By this time I'm hunkering along in front of the place, trying to maintain a casual attitude, except like I said my feet are going wild that year and I keep tripping over everything. Cracks in the sidewalk, ants on the sidewalk, shadows, anything.

Then the strange little dude jerks himself around and he catches sight of me and he lifts a crutch and points it up at my heart and he goes, "Identify yourself, earthling."

I'm busy keeping my feet from tripping and don't get it that he means me.

"I said identify yourself, earthling, or suffer the consequences."

I'm like, what? And before I can decide

whether or not to tell him my name, or *which* name, because by now I recognize him as the weird little robot kid from day care and maybe he remembers me as Kicker, anyhow before I can say a word he pulls the trigger on that crutch and makes a weapon noise, and he goes, "Then die, earthling, die!"

I motor out of there without saying a word. Because I'm pretty sure he really means it. The way he points that crutch is only part of it. You have to see the look in his eye. Man, that little dude really hates me.

He *wants* me to die.



### 3.

## American Flyer

Okay, back to the down under, right? My room in the basement. Scuttle into your dim hole in the ground, Maxwell dear. Big goon like you, growing about an inch a day, and this midget kid, this crippled little humanoid, he actually *scared* you. Not the kind of scare that makes your knee bones feel like water, more the kind of scare where you go whoa! I don't understand this, I don't get it, what's going on?

Like calling me "earthling." Which by itself is pretty weird, right? I already mentioned a few of the names I've been called, but until the robot boy showed up, nobody had ever called me *earthling*, and so I'm lying on my mattress there in the great down under, and it comes to me that he's right, I *am* an earthling, we're all of us earthlings, but we don't call each other earthling. No need. Because it's the same thing that in this country we're all Americans, but we don't go around to people and say, "Excuse me, Ameri-

can, can you tell me how to get to the nearest 7 Eleven?"

So I'm thinking about that for a while, lying there in the cellar dark, and pretty soon the down under starts to get small, like the walls are shrinking, and I go up the bulkhead stairs into the back yard and find a place where I can check it out.

There's this one scraggly tree behind the little freak's house, right? Like a stick in the ground with a few wimped-out branches. And there he is, hardly any bigger now than he was in day care, and he's standing there waving his crutch up at the tree.

I kind of slide over to the chain-link fence, get a better angle on the scene. What's he *doing* whacking at that crummy tree? Trying to jump up and hit this branch with his little crutch, and he's mad, hopping mad. Only he can't really jump, he just makes this jumping kind of motion. His feet never leave the ground.

Then what he does, he throws down the crutch and he gets down on his hands and knees and crawls back to his house. If you didn't know, you would think he was like a kindergarten creeper who forgot how to walk, he's that small. And he crawls real good, better than he can walk. Before you know it, he's dragging this wagon out from under the steps.

Rusty red thing, one of those old American Flyer models. Anyhow, the little freak is tugging



it backwards, a few inches at a time. Chugging along until he gets that little wagon under the tree. Next thing he picks up his crutch and he climbs in the wagon and he stands up and he's whacking at the tree again.

By now I've figured out that there's something stuck up in the branches and he wants to get it down. This small, bright-colored thing, looks like a piece of folded paper. Whatever it is, that paper thing, he wants it real bad, but even with the wagon there's no way he can reach it. No way.

So I go over there to his back yard, trying to be really quiet, but I'm no good at sneaking up, not with these humongous feet, and he turns and faces me with that crutch raised up like he's ready to hit a grand slam on my head.

He wants to say something, you can tell that much, but he's so mad, he's all huffed up and the noise he makes, it could be from a dog or something, and he sounds like he can hardly breathe.

What I do, I keep out of range of that crutch and just reach up and pick the paper thing right out of the tree. Except it's not a paper thing. It's a plastic bird, light as a feather. I have to hold it real careful or it might break, that's how flimsy it is.

I go, "You want this back or what?"

The little freak is staring at me bug-eyed, and he goes, "Oh, it talks."

I give him the bird-thing. "What is it, like a model airplane or something?"

You can tell he's real happy to have the bird-thing back, and his face isn't quite so fierce. He sits down in the wagon, and he goes, "This is an ornithopter. An ornithopter is defined as an experimental device propelled by flapping wings. Or you could say that an ornithopter is just a big word for mechanical bird."

That's how he talked, like right out of a dictionary. So smart you can hardly believe it. While he's talking he's winding up the bird-thing. There's this elastic band inside, and he goes, "Observe and be amazed, earthling," and then he lets it go, and you know what? I *am* amazed, because it does fly just like a little bird, flitting up and down and around, higher than I can reach.

I chase after the thing until it boinks against the scrawny tree trunk and I bring it back to him and he winds it up again and makes it fly. We keep doing that, it must be for almost an hour, until finally the elastic breaks. I figure that's it, end of ornithopter, but he says something like, "All mechanical objects require periodic maintenance. We'll schedule installation of a new propulsion unit as soon as the Fair Gwen of Air gets a replacement."

Even though I'm not sure what he means, I go, "That's cool."

"You live around here, earthling?"



"Over there." I point out the house. "In the down under."

He goes, "What?" and I figure it's easier to show him than explain all about Gram and Grim and the room in the cellar, so I pick up the handle to the American Flyer wagon and I tow him over.

It's real easy, he doesn't weigh much and I'm pretty sure I remember looking back and seeing him sitting up in the wagon happy as can be, like he's really enjoying the ride and not embarrassed to have me pulling him around.

But like Freak says later in this book, you can remember anything, whether it happened or not. All I'm really sure of is he never hit me with that crutch.

## 4.

### *What Frightened the Fair Gwen*

Freak's not in my room for ten minutes before he sets me straight on the Fair Gwen. He's able to hump down the steps by himself, except it makes him sort of out of breath, you can hear him wheezing or I guess you'd call it panting, like a dog does on a hot day. He gets into my room and I close the bulkhead door, and he goes, "Cool. You get to live down here all by yourself?"

"I eat upstairs with Grim and Gram."

Freak works himself up onto the foot of my bed and uses a pillow to make himself comfortable. It's pretty dim down here, only the daylight from one basement window, but it catches him just right and makes his eyes shine. "Gram must be your grandmother," he says. "Grim would be, I suppose, a sobriquet for your grandfather, based on his demeanor."

I go, "Huh?"

Freak grins and pushes back his yellow hair, and he goes, "Pardon my vocabulary. Sobriquet



means 'nickname,' and demeanor means 'expression.' I merely **postulated** that you call your grandfather 'Grim' because he's grim. Postulate means — "

"I know," I say. Which is a lie, except I can guess what he means, figure it out that way. "So how come you call your mom 'Fair Gwen of Air,' is that a nickname?"

Freak is shaking his head. I can see he's trying not to let on that he's laughing inside. "Guinevere," he finally says, catching his breath. "The Fair Guinevere, from the legend of King Arthur. You know about King Arthur, right?"

I shrug. The only King Arthur I know is the brand of flour Gram uses, and if I say that I'll *really* sound like a butthead.

He goes, "My mom's name is Gwen, so sometimes I call her the Fair Guinevere or the Fair Gwen. King Arthur was the first king of England, way back when there were still dragons and monsters in the world. Arthur was this wimpy little kid, an orphan, and there was this magic sword stuck in a big stone, okay? The old king had died, and whoever could pull the sword from the stone proved he was the next king. All these big tough dudes came from all over to yank at the sword and they couldn't budge it. One day this wimpy little kid tried it when nobody was looking and the sword slipped out like it was stuck in butter."

"So he was the king, this little kid?"

Freak nods, he's really into this story, and he's

making shapes in the air with his hands. This is the first time for me, hearing Freak really talk, and right away I know one thing: When he's talking, you can't take your eyes off of him. His hands are moving, and it's like he's really seeing it, this story about an old king.

"Arthur's magical sword is called Excalibur, and the Fair Guinevere is this pretty girl who becomes his queen. 'Fair' in those days meant the same as 'beautiful' does now. Anyhow, Arthur got bored just sitting around, so he invited all the knights of England to come live in the castle. They all ate supper at this round table, which is why they were called the Knights of the Round Table. Every now and then King Arthur would send them off on a special secret mission, which in the old days they called a 'quest.' They had to slay dragons and monsters and evil knights. I assume you know what a knight wears into battle?"

I think so, but I like hearing Freak talk, so I go, "Better tell me," and that's when I find out why he's so interested in some clanky old knights.

Because Freak really lights up and he goes, "The knights were like the first human version of robots. They wore this metal armor to protect them and make them invincible. When I get my stuff unpacked I'll show you the pictures. It's pretty amazing, really, that hundreds of years before they had computers they were already



attempting to exceed the design limitations of the human body."

I go, "Huh?" and Freak sort of chuckles to himself, like he expected me to go "Huh?" and he says, "The design limitations of the human body. You know, like we're not bullet-proof and we can't crush rocks with our bare hands, and if we touch a hot stove we get burned. King Arthur wanted to *improve* his men, so he made them armor-plated. Then he programmed them to go out and do these quests, slay the dragons and so on, which is sort of how they program robots right now."

I go, "I thought there weren't any real robots. Just in the movies."

Boy does that make his eyes blaze. Like whoa! talk about laser beams! He's like *fuming*, so upset he can hardly talk.

Finally he gets control of himself and he goes, "I suppose I must make allowances for your ignorance. On the subject of robots you are clearly misinformed. Robots are not just in the movies. Robotics, the science of designing and building functional robots, is a *huge* industry. There are *thousands* of robot units presently in use. *Millions* of them. They don't look like the robots you see in movies, of course, because they're designed according to function. Many robotic devices are in fact sophisticated assembly units, machines that put together cars and trucks and computers. For instance, the space shuttle has a robot arm."

"Right," I say. "I saw that on TV."

Freak sighs and rolls his eyes. "Ah, yes," he says. "Television, the opiate of the masses."

For about the eleventh time I go, "Huh?"

"Opiate, a drug," he says. "Massive, that means large and heavy. Thus television is the drug of fat heads. Opiate of the masses."

"You don't have a TV?"

"Of course I have a television," he says. "How else could I watch *Star Trek*? Matter of fact, I watch *tons* of tube, but I also read tons of books so I can figure out what's true and what's fake, which isn't always easy. Books are like truth serum — if you don't read, you can't figure out what's real."

This time I don't say *huh* because then I might have to explain how I'm an L.D., and reading books is the last thing I want to do, right after trimming my toenails with a lawn mower, gargling nails, and eating worms for breakfast. Of course Freak has probably already guessed I'm a learning disabled, because he's had a look around my room and it isn't exactly the public library.

"I'll lend you some of my books," he says.

"Cool," I say, like it's just what I've been waiting for, another chance to prove I'm a butthead.

Then we both hear it at the same time, this voice calling his name and sounding real worried.

"The Fair Gwen," he says. "I gotta beam out of here."

I go up and open the bulkhead door and his



mother is in the back yard and she's looking at the little red wagon. She catches sight of me coming up out of the down under and it's like somebody shot her. Like she's scared out of her mind. "Kevin?" she says. "I'm looking for a little boy."

Freak is huffing and puffing as he humps himself up the steps, and the Fair Gwen grabs Freak and puts him in the wagon and I swear, she almost runs home, like if she doesn't get away quick something really bad is going to happen. Freak is in the wagon and he's trying to look back at me, trying to shrug his shoulders and let me know he doesn't understand what got into the Fair Gwen, but I know.

It's pretty simple, really. She's scared of me.

## 5. *Spitting Image*

There's a place I go inside my head sometimes. It's cool and dim in there and you float like a cloud — no, you *are* a cloud, the kind you see in the sky on a windy day, the way they keep changing shape except you can't really see it changing? It just sort of happens, and suddenly you realize the cloud that looks like a big hand with fat fingers now looks like a catcher's mitt, or a big soft TV set? Like that.

Anyhow, I went there right after the Fair Gwen ran off with that look on her face, like: What was he *doing* with my poor little boy, stealing him away in the wagon?

What I do is lie on the floor under my bed, where you can just barely see the bedsprings and stuff because it's so dark, and before long I'm somewhere else, sort of floating, and it's so cool and empty in there, you don't have to think about anything. You're nothing, you're nobody, nothing matters, you're not even there. *Time out.*

Except this time I can't stay as long as I'd like



because Gram is knocking on the door. Going, "Maxwell? Max, are you there? Please answer me, dear, it's important."

Yeah, right. But I wedge out from under the bed — there's getting to be less and less room under there — and I dust myself off and open the door. There's no lock, but Gram has this thing about waiting until I say come in, she makes a big deal about not intruding.

"Maxwell," she says, and she takes a little step inside the room and you can tell she'd rather not be here, she makes this face because the place is dark and messy and probably it smells like my socks or whatever. "Max, dear, I'm sorry to bother you — you know I *never* come into the basement — but I just got a call from Gwen Avery and I think it's important."

Uh-oh, I'm thinking. Now the Fair Gwen is calling up my Gram, probably to report a great hulking beast that lives in the cellar, and I close up inside, waiting for the worst.

"She called to say how sorry she was," Gram is saying.

"Huh?"

"I guess she came to pick up her little boy, is that right? You and Kevin were making friends?"

*Making friends.* What a wet idea *that* is, but Gram gets her feelings hurt pretty easy, so I don't actually say that. What I say is, "Yeah, I guess so."

Gram is uneasy, I can see her eyes flitting nervously around the room, like she's crossing

the border into a really foreign country. This is as good a place as any to mention that even though Gram is my grandmother, she doesn't look like a granny, she looks more like a mother because she was, as she always says, "a mere child myself" when my real mother was born.

"Well, uhm, I get the impression poor Gwen wasn't expecting to see you looking so big, and now she thinks she's offended you. Does that make any sense?"

"I guess so. You know her, huh?"

"Oh my yes," says Gram. "Gwen was a good friend of your mother's. They were both pregnant at the same time. Then later on you and little Kevin went to the same day care, did you know that?"

I give a shrug because I don't really like Gram to know how much I remember about way back then.

Gram is saying, "She said — she especially wanted me to tell you this, Max — she said she's delighted that you and Kevin are going to be friends. That's the word she used — delighted. And she's inviting you to supper."

First thing, without thinking, I say, "Do I have to?"

Gram reaches out and she puts her hand on my shoulder, real light and feathery, you can feel how nervous she is just to touch me, and how it makes her uncomfortable to have to look up at me, because did I mention I'm a lot bigger



than Gram? Bigger than Grim, too? Bigger than most people? It's true.

Gram says, "She feels bad about how she treated you, Maxwell, dear, and she wants to make it up to you. You don't *have* to go, but it would be the right thing to do."

"It was no big deal," I say. "She just ran away is all. I guess I scared her."

"It wasn't you," Gram says.

"No? Then who was it scared her?"

Now she's got her tongue stuck, and you can see her swallowing in her throat, like her mouth is dry. "I'll just leave that to Gwen," she says. "She's quite a remarkable young woman, you know. Raising that poor boy all on her own."

"He's not a poor boy," I say. "You should hear him talk. I think the rest of him is so small because his brain is so big."

"Yes," says Gram. "Well well."

Gram is always saying that, well well, like it means something, which I guess it does to her. Anyhow, I agree to have supper with Freak and his mom, even though the idea of it makes me feel tensed up, like there is a hand inside my stomach and the hand is, you know, making a fist.

It turns out to be not so bad. The Fair Gwen, right away she's beaming at me, bouncing around the kitchen and talking a mile a minute, so fast the words kind of smoosh together.

"SodidSusanexcusemeyourgrandmothermen-

tionyourmomandIwerepalsthat is . . . untilshe gotmarriedexcusemeI never . . . *could* abide thatmanIalways thoughtthewascrazyand . . . scary isitokaytosaythatyou . . . won'tbeoffended?"

It's like this delay while I sort it out, and then I go, "Yeah, Gram told me," and the stuff about her knowing my father and thinking he was sick in the head, I decide no comment is the way to go.

"You were the cutest little baby," Gwen says.

"I remember like it was yesterday. We were all of us living over in the tenements in those days, because the rent was so cheap and we were all just starting out."

Freak is on the floor, digging through the packing boxes for pots and pans and stuff, he's almost inside this box, all you can see is his funny little rear end sticking out. You'd think he was maybe two years old, that's how small he is, until you notice where his leg brace makes a lump in his pants.

From inside the box he goes, "Hey, Gwen, leave the guy alone, huh? You're going spastic."

"Am I?" Gwen asks. She's at the counter, going through drawers and looking for spoons or whatever. "Sorry, Max. That is, I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot. It's just, you know . . ."

Freak's head pops out of the box and he's got this wicked know-it-all grin. "What she means is, you're a spitting image of your old man."

Gwen says, "Kevin, please," and her voice is



real small, like she's embarrassed.

"Yeah," I say. "Everybody says that."

"They do?"

I shrug. Is it really such a big deal for a boy to look like his father? Which is typical butthead thinking, because of course it's a big deal, if your father happens to be in prison. Which everybody in town knows about, it's not like there's any secret about what he did or why he's there, except everybody *acts* like it should be a secret, and the bigger I grow and the more I look like my old man, the worse it gets.

"You really knew him?" I say. "I mean him and my mom when they were together?"

"Not very well," Gwen says. She's looking for a knife to slice open a pack of hot dogs. "I never saw much of your mom after they got married. He made it . . . difficult for your mother to have any friends."

There's a knife on the table and I pick it up and hand it to the Fair Gwen. She doesn't flinch away and I decide she's okay, she's really pretty cool.

"So," Freak is saying. "When do we eat? My fuel cells are depleted."

Supper is great. The Fair Gwen makes this really tasty potato salad with spices and stuff, way better than the mushy stuff Gram makes, and we have hot dogs fried in a pan with the buns toasted up butter-crisp just the way I like, and two kinds of relish and three kinds of mus-

tard, and red onions cut up real small.

We sit out in the back yard eating from paper plates, and Freak tells robot stories that are so strange and funny I'm laughing like a maniac and then I'm choking and Freak is pounding me on the back.

"Expel the object!" Freak shouts. "Regurgitate, you big moron!" and he gives me another thump and I cough up this yucky mess, but I'm still laughing so hard my nose is running.

What a goon, except it really *is* funny, me trying to sneeze a hot dog through my nose, and we're both laughing like total morons.

"This is great," Gwen says, looking at Freak and me. "I'm so glad we decided to move back, you know? I feel like we're all getting a fresh start."

It's time to go home, Gram gets nervous if I'm not back before dark. Everything seems really great, just like Gwen says, except when I lie down on my bed it hits me, boom, and I'm crying like a baby. And the really weird thing is, I'm happy.



## 6. *Close Encounter of the Turd Kind*

Fourth of July, right? Everybody goes nuts. The dads are getting drunk and having their cook-outs, and the moms are trying to keep all the brats from blowing their precious little pinkies off with cherry bombs, and the kids are running wild through the back yards. It's like no rules apply, and that makes everything real *edgy*, if you know what I mean, like let's have a blast and who cares what happens.

Don't get the wrong idea. I *love* the Fourth. It's just that people tend to get all choked up about firecracker holidays, and they don't see what's *really* going on, which like I say is the dads *swilling* beer and acting numb, that's the basic formula.

Not that Grim ever swills anything stronger than root beer. No way. The poison never crossed his lips, he likes to say, even though I've seen a picture of him in the army and that sure *looks* like a bottle of beer in his hand, and he's got that same wacked-by-a-hammer grin that

dudes always get when they're drinking.

Anyhow, this is the first year I get to go to the fireworks without Grim and Gram, which I've never understood, because it's right down by the millpond where I've been allowed to go for years, so why should it make a difference just because about a million people show up to watch the rockets' red glare over that smelly pond?

The deal this year is that I get to go with Freak, which Gram thinks is a good idea because she's afraid he'll get crushed or something, she actually thinks people are going to *step* on him, which just goes to show how brainless she can be sometimes, and scared of everything. I mean nobody steps on little kids down there, so why should they step on Freak?

Turns out the thing to worry about is not kidstompers, but beer swillers, like I mentioned before. Because Freak and I are still a couple of blocks from the pond, just kind of easing our way along, when these punks start mouth-ing off.

"Hey you! Mutt and Jeff! Frankenstein and Igor! Don't look around, I'm talkin' to you, bone-heads. What is this, a freak show?"

I know that voice. Tony D., they call him Blade, he's at least seventeen and he's already been to juvy court three, four times. I heard he cut a guy with a razor, he almost died, and everybody says the best way to handle Tony D.



and his gang is, you avoid them. Cross the street, hide, whatever it takes.

"Yeah you," he goes, and he's doing his hip-pity walk, strutting along, he's got these fancy cool cowboy boots with metal toes. "Yeah, Andre the giant and the dwarf, hold on a sec, I want a word with you."

Only the way he talks, he goes ah wanna woid weecha, except it's bad enough having to listen to the creep, I don't want to have to spell the dumb way he talks. Anyhow, big mistake, we stop and wait for Tony D., alias the bad-news Blade.

"Got any, dudes?" he asks, pretending like he's friendly. He's a couple feet away, but you can smell the beer on his breath. Also it smells like he ate something dead, for instance road kill, but maybe that's my imagination.

"Pay attention," Tony D. says. "I asked did you got any."

Freak, his chest is all puffed out and his chin looks hard and he's looking right up at Tony D., and he says, "Got any what?"

Tony D. has his hands on his hips and his punkster pals are trying to get closer, working through the crowd. He leans over Freak and he says, "Boomers, you little freak. M80s. Maybe a rack of cherry bombs, is that what's making a lump in your pocket, huh?"

Freak starts to hump himself away, trying to walk faster than he really can, which makes his leg brace bump against the ground. "Come

along, Maxwell," he says over his shoulder. "Ignore the cretin."

Blade goes, "Hey what?" and he moves right in front of Freak. "Want to say that again, little freak man?"

Freak says, "Cretin. C-R-E-T-I-N. Defined as one who suffers from mental deficiency."

Hearing how little tiny Freak is dissing the fearsome Tony D., alias Blade, I can't help it, I laugh out loud. Tony D. is looking up at me and he's showing his white teeth, I swear they've been sharpened to look like vampire teeth, and I go, "Uh-oh," and start to get real cold inside. Real icy, because I can see that Blade is trying to make up his mind, is he going to fight me, or is he just going to kill me quick?

Just then I hear the whoop of a siren and like a miracle this cop car comes out of nowhere, heading for the millpond, and Blade takes one look and he and his punksters are out of there, burning rubber in their Reeboks.

Freak goes, "Whew! That was a close encounter of the turd kind," and it takes me a second to get the joke, but then I'm laughing, amazed he can be so cool about it, like it was no big deal that Tony D. was after us.

"You *can* take him, right?" he asks a couple minutes later.

I go, "Are you kidding? You can't just fight Blade, you have to fight his gang, too."

"You mean you *couldn't* take him and I was giving him lip?"



"That's about the size of it."

Freak goes, "Oh my *gawwwwwwd!*" and he's shrieking and laughing and whooping it up so loud that everybody is looking at us like we're total goons, which isn't far from the truth.

Freak hasn't got his crutch tonight, just the leg brace, and he's laughing so hard he falls down. Not that he has far to go. Anyhow, I pick him up and I'm amazed how light he is. Like it's *nothing* for me to lift him, and maybe that's where I get the idea. Because later, when we're down by the pond and the first of the rockets is streaking up, up, up, Freak is making a fuss because he can't see. There are so many people crowded around, all he can see are feet and knees, and people are lifting their little kids up to see the fireworks explode like hot pink flowers in the sky, and so I just sort of reach down without thinking and pick up Freak and set him on my shoulders.

He's kind of trembly up there until he grabs hold of my hair to steady himself, and then the first really big rocket whams off, a humongous *thud!* I can feel in my stomach, and Freak is shouting, "*Awwwww right!*" and I know it's okay, he's not flipped out because I picked him up and put him on my shoulders like he was a little kid instead of possibly the smartest human being in the whole world.

"Magnesium!" he shouts as the white sparkles glitter down over the pond. "Potassium chlorate!" as the shells go womp-womp-womp and

everybody goes oooooooh. "Potassium nitrate! Sulphur! Aluminum!" And after a burst of hot red fire in the sky, Freak tugs my hair and screams, "Copper! That's copper powder combusting with oxygen!" And when the fire blossoms are flashing blue he goes, "Good old strontium nitrate!" and I'm thinking whoa! is there anything this little dude *doesn't* know?

At the end, like always, they have a thing they call the "grand finale," when they just go nuts and light off everything at once and it sounds like World War III, whizzing and banging and popping, and there's so much hot stuff falling from the sky you can hear it sizzling in the pond. Freak keeps on shouting out the names of chemicals and elements, until the last spark dies in that scummy pond and the crowd cheers and then everybody tries to leave at once, like a bunch of morons.