**The Empty Land**

***“To the dream undreamt***

***To the tune unheard***

***To the mystery unsolved***

***To my kaleidoscopic past***”

# Chapter 1

I have to admit to a great many mistakes that I have made in life. I committed one of these – possibly my biggest, some years ago when I told my wife about my true life experience, my ghostly past. And that was just hours before leaving on a six month deployment to Kosovo. I told my wife my story in mid-November 1999, at a United States Army base in Hanau, Germany. I am an army man. That was where I had been stationed with my family at the time.

The First Sergeant of my unit had just called me into his office to let me know that I would be heading off to Kosovo the next day. He said that he knew I had been caught unawares, because it was two weeks earlier than had been originally planned for me. On a personal level I could see that it would lead to a host of other problems. I could also see that this was not the worst part. The worst was the fact that I would have to leave at the crack of dawn the next morning. To make matters worse, I knew that I would not get off work too early today.

I knew and he knew that I needed to go home to wrap up things there. First, there was the business of having to spring the surprise on my wife. I would have to tell her that I would be leaving a lot earlier than she expected. I would have to tell her that it would be as early as tomorrow. I would like to break this to her in my own way and she would find a way of accepting it. Then, I would have to pack my gear for some six months away on deployment duty in a country torn by war.

I finally managed to get off home just before darkness fell. As I drove home I was trying to figure out how and what to tell my wife. Either way, it would be bad news for her, and unexpected bad news at that. It made me feel guilty all right. It also made me feel slightly scared because I knew what her likely reaction would be. There was no way she would avoid feeling lost and even crushed in spirit. She knew, and I did too, that she did not deserve this. I also knew just how difficult it would be for her to face up to my sudden departure.

She had been having a difficult enough time trying to come to terms with my having to leave in two weeks time. Tonight she would come to know that I was leaving not in two weeks as we had been told, but in a couple of hours. That was going to make it impossibly more difficult right away.

That I would have to go early tomorrow was a reality for me, not for her as yet. Would my wife be mad at me for suddenly leaving her to handle our two young boys? The answer, also in my head, was an unequivocal ‘yes.’ We had only lived in Hanau for the last four months. I could hear her telling me that four months were not enough time for her and that it was not long enough for me. Neither of us had settled down as yet into our new lives here in Germany. And now I was being sent off with the shortest possible notice, on a six month tour to war-torn Kosovo.

My wife and I have been married for only five short years. My deployment to Kosovo was going to be our first long separation. This she was aware of. We had been aware that I would have to live away from my family from time to time as per the dictates of the United States army. I had managed to maintain a good track record on that count, through short stints away. It had lasted a couple of postings at MacDill A.F.B. Florida.

My wife had managed at the time, mainly because she had garnered plenty of support through the base church. She had become a member of the base church at MacDill as soon as we got there. There would be none of that here in Hanau. She would be completely on her own with the kids. No church, no friends, no car. And it was my fault.

My wife Yonsun is from a small town in Korea. We met back in 1994, by which time she had moved to their capital Seoul. I had joined the Army and was stationed in Korea at the time. She did not drive in her own country. All that came about only after we married and moved to MacDill. I was thinking now that we had been here for four months, time enough for me to have taught her to drive on the other side here in Germany. The realization racked me. She could have done with a car to get around, but now would have to hop on and off a city bus with our youngsters wherever and whenever she needed to go. And that too for a good six months while I was away.

So much for delayed awareness. I arrived home and opened the door of our apartment . My wife rushed to give me her ritual welcome home hug and kiss. That was good, but brought on my guilt doubly more. My four year old son Arthur stood right behind his mother for his turn to hug and kiss his father. My two year old son Allen was sat on the floor next to the couch.

“Welcome home Honey,” Yonsun said cheerfully. I felt still worse. Words stuck in my throat and I could not look into her eyes. She knew instinctively that something was amiss. She made it slightly easier by asking me what was wrong.

I did not have time to beat around the bush with her. I did not have time for anything. I chose words my First Sergeant had used and launched into, “I’ve been chosen to head off to Kosovo two weeks early.”

She was trying to figure this out. I had got it out all wrong. What I was afraid of had begun. “Two weeks early! But you leave in two weeks,” she said. She had not understood what I had tried to tell her.

“You were always good at maths,” I said in a bad attempt at comic relief. “My First Sergeant has just told me that I am leaving for Kosovo early tomorrow morning.”

Yonsun paused. She looked carefully at me. She did not blink. I knew that she was wondering how close this could be to some kind of a joke.

I reached out and took her hand. “I’m serious. I need to hurry and pack my gear because I leave very early tomorrow morning.”

A silent cry escaped her lips. Her eyes, I could see, were watering. Her head reeled and Yonsun thought that she might collapse. It was not the best time she knew, but she had not chosen it. She knew that I was serious. I picked up Arthur and kissed him on the forehead. I put him down on the floor next to Allen. I told the two of them to go ahead and play. I told them that their mother and I had a lot of talking to do.

I turned around to my wife. I had also thought that Yonsun might collapse. I caught her just in time as she went limp. I tried to hold her up and guided her to the couch. We sat there with our arms around each other for what seemed like ages. I had told Arthur that Yonsun and I were going to talk, but we just sat there without speaking. Arthur looked over at us questioningly. I owed every one an explanation. Now that the crunch had come I did know what to say. I settled it by telling myself that we did not need to speak. We understood each other perfectly, including what had remained unsaid.

What could a soldier say to his wife hours before his deployment to a war zone, knowing that he would not be back for six months, or worse – not at all?

I eventually got up and told her that I needed to pack my gear. I went to our bedroom and selected all that I would need over six months. I put it down on the living room floor, ready to start packing. My children played around the living room among themselves and my gear. Arthur searched through everything till he came across my Kevlar helmet. The helmet seemed as big as him. But the Kevlar was what fascinated him the most. He put it over his head. “Look Mommy, I am a soldier,” my older boy said.

“I hope not.” I thought to myself. He looked real cute and I would be proud of him if he would follow me into my profession. My country is worth fighting for. But I hoped that he would never have to be in the same predicament as I was in right now. Arthur was done with my helmet. He set it aside and got up to play with his younger brother. I sat down in the middle of all the scattered gear and began to sort and pack it into several large duffel bags. I had done all this too often in the past and hoped that it would not take too long. My wife sat by my side.

She was quiet and contemplative, but not for long. “If I break my leg, do you have to go?” My wife asked.

“Yes, I still would have to go. You want to break your own leg?” I asked laughing. But this was a different question to what it could be at face value. It was also a different situation. I tried to control my laughter.

“I will break my own leg if I knew that would stop you from going,” was her answer. She may have been serious. My laughter dried up. I knew she would break her own leg to prevent me from going to Kosovo if she had to. Like most military wives, she really did not want her husband to go into war, into harm’s way.

But the army was my work and my life. I had to go! I had prepared for these postings. My inner self knew that I would face life as it came. I told myself that she had to have understood this by now. I told myself that she knew that I wanted to go because it was my job. Deep down, she would understand why.

Arthur and Allen, in the meanwhile, were unaware of the emotional drama that was going on between their father and mother. They were playing their favorite game, something I had christened ‘the windowsill challenge.’ Our living room windowsill was about five inches wide and a foot off the floor. It spanned the entire length of the room. Its height was just right for them to want to clamber on. Their sole objective was to hang on to the window frames while they climbed up on the windowsill, feel their way through with the glass panes to guide them and scoot along to the other end. They clung on to the windows but fell off very often. When that happened, they would get up, dust themselves down and climb back onto the windowsill all over again.

I had seen them run along this windowsill many a time. But something on the panes caught my attention this evening. The boys were busy again with another game. I noticed that they had left behind telltale signs of their windowsill challenge. I was looking at their handprints on the window pane glass. I could not help but look. My eyes widened and my heart began to thump against my chest. My memory was stirring, slowly.

I had been about the same age as Arthur when I had moved with my family into a house in a city which was new to all of us. But that was not the time I recalled now. What I remembered was a time filled with fear, of tiny palm prints. That came some years later, when I was eleven years old.

But here in Hanau my stare was obvious. “What are you looking at?” My wife asked. I could not answer. I felt warm. I could feel a flush spreading. I felt faint. I swayed on my feet. Yonsun had reacted better than this, when I had managed to catch her in the nick of time. My wife put her arm around me. She was now propping me, holding me up. “Hello, are you there?” She asked gently. Later she told me that she thought that what I was going though was a delayed reaction to the news of my departure tomorrow.

Right now I could not talk. I could not answer her. If I could have, my answer would have been a “no.” It is true that I felt that I was not really there….other images were streaming through, from a place far away. I was elsewhere, and I was in a dreamlike state, revisiting a time long past. A time when I had been a prisoner of fear and torment. My eyes were fixed on those fresh handprints on the window panes. And then, it came back to me out of the mists of time. A long ago, horribly familiar burning smell.

I had found my voice. “This can’t be happening,” I said faintly, but loud enough for my wife to hear. It did not make any sense to her and she was mystified. “What can’t be happening?” She wanted to know.

I had to come up with something. The burning smell was stronger now. It took both of us the next few seconds to identify that the strong burning smell in our apartment was from something Yonsun had left to cook in the kitchen. She had forgotten about a dish left in the oven in honor of me and my announcement. She jumped up from where she was sitting next to me and ran into the kitchen yelling, “With all the excitement, I forgot your dinner was in the oven!” She yanked open the oven door and the fire alarm took off. My senses came back to the present. Arthur and Allen ran to their bedrooms to escape the loud buzz of the fire alarm.

Yonsun took care of the crisis and came back to the living room. She knelt next to me, wanting to be near. I was very still while I contemplated those long ago terrors I thought I had buried. “Anything wrong, honey? Are you feeling okay?” She asked. She had forgotten about herself and now stared at the window, trying to understand why I had looked at it the way I did.

I was back to the here and now. I told her that the little handprints had reminded me of a story. “Everything reminds you of a story.” She was having her own laugh at my expense.

“You remember the story about my brother Ricky and how he died?” I asked my wife. “Yes” she responded but she was not too happy about my bringing up the topic just now, I could tell. She was wondering where all this was leading.

“What I was thinking about was sort of tied up with that… one thing that I never told you about is the story of me and Candle Face,” I began to say by way of explanation. I must have been getting worse at clearing her doubts, because she asked outright, “Candle Face? Who or what is Candle Face?” She laughed uneasily. She was still slightly nervous.

“Candle Face is the nickname that I gave to a girl who used to regularly feature in my dreams when I was a child,” I said. I carried on, “According to rumors in our South Austin locality, she had died in a house fire next door to the house that I grew up in. Our friends and neighbors said that the house had burnt down a few years before my I moved into the neighborhood as a small boy. I still do not know if the rumors are true. But at that time she would visit me usually after everyone else had gone to sleep. I would have nightmares about her torturing me. I still do not know if those were dreams or whether they actually happened. Candle Face seemed real enough to me.”

Yonsun was waiting for more. I had to collect my thoughts and continue, “Though I told no one, I was convinced about her at the time. I saw signs of her everywhere. I saw her childish palm prints on our windows at home in South Austin one morning. I could see her. I could feel her touch me…I even smelled her nauseating burnt flesh odor. She was that real!”

My wife yelled, “Stop. Why did you never tell me about this?” She was looking at me, but now it was a look of new discovery, of wanting to share any dark unknown facts from that part of my life, from my past. I could answer now, “I think I just wanted to forget about that time and those memories. I haven’t thought about them in years.”

A small person interrupted us. “Mommy, I’m tired.” Arthur spoke in his usual soft voice. My wife was more direct, “Hold that thought, Honey. I want to hear everything about it when I get back.” Yonsun picked up Allen and took him to his room. Arthur toddled behind her to his room. She put both of them to bed. It was quite late now and way past our children’s bedtime. They slept the sleep of the innocent. I thought about my own childhood and the nightmares it had held for me. Yonsun came back to sit down on the couch next to me. She was still did not know what to think of my dark secret.

“I can’t believe you never mentioned anything about Candle Face to me before,” Yonsun said. We were so much part of each other’s lives, that she was amazed that she had no inkling of this part of my life. For me it was a forgettable part of my childhood.

I was apologetic now, “I never said anything about it before because I haven’t thought about it for years.  The last time I saw Candle Face was soon after Ricky died. The last time I thought about it was on the night of my high school prom seven years ago when I was dropping my prom date home.  That prom was some time before you and I met.” She seemed resigned now. “So what happened?” She asked.

“You really want to know?” I asked back. “I want to know everything about your life! You know everything about mine,” was what she said.

She sat expectantly, her pose again serious as she leant forward, her knees pulled up to her chest, her chin pressing down on her knees in a sitting fetal position. Yonsun was looking up at me. She was waiting for me to start.

I looked at my watch. I had about six hours left before I would get up and go to Kosovo with my gear and old memories triggered by children’s palm prints. I wanted to tell her that particular story about my childhood. I needed to unburden myself. My wife was ready for a story and so was I.

I had more or less finished packing by now. My kit bags were ready, waiting to be taken with me early tomorrow. I put my gear down near the entrance door and looked outside. It was a moonless night, perfect for a real life ghost story. Or so I thought.

I was on the couch near her. Yonsun was looking up at me. She was waiting for me to start. She was now truly ready to hear what I had to say. I began my story...

**Chapter 2**

My mother had found a step dad for us when I was around four years old. They moved us to the city of Austin in Texas. I have hardly any memory of my life before that, except to know that Mom had left two husbands behind by the time Raymond arrived. We moved into a house on Ben Howell Drive in South Austin. When I say ‘we’ I mean my step dad Raymond, Mom Shelia and my brothers, Ricky, Dennis and Frank. Ricky had been born Ricky Allen Mills. I had been born Arthur, but because I was close to Raymond I let him give me the nickname ‘Ray.’

Raymond came from a Mexican-American background, as did a lot of folks around us in South Austin and in school. Raymond and I would often watch the TV show *All in the Family.* We spent time together, occasionally talking about what interested us. I knew from the way that he shouted at Archie in *All in the Family,* that he hated people who discriminated against other people on grounds of their race. I agreed with him. So did all of us.

Raymond told me on one occasion that when he met Shelia, she was bringing up all of us on welfare and living in the projects. Raymond said that he liked her and me well enough to want to take us in, work hard and make sure that we did not stay on welfare. He and Shelia had managed to do this by getting us into No. 304 Ben Howell Drive, our own house.

Among my brothers, Ricky and I had the same father and were just a year and a half apart; Ricky being the elder. My brothers Dennis and Frank were much older and came from my mother’s first marriage. They were better known as Dino and Poncho among their friends, though I always thought of them – still do, as Dennis and Frank. As with me, Raymond was probably involved in assigning them their nicknames.

I can see now that I loved Ricky in many ways, despite his offhand manner towards a younger brother and despite the beatings he sometimes inflicted on me. It was understood that I had to keep this fact of Ricky’s behavior from Raymond and Shelia.

He must have felt some sort of exasperated love for me as I did for him, or at least I hope so. He would often get into a jealous rage and tell me that Raymond favored me. I realized that it may have been true. I was aware, even at the time, that Raymond may have singled me out for attention. What I could not figure out was why Raymond had never tried to draw Ricky in as he had done for me. I would have given anything to have that Ricky Allen alive today.

Dennis and Frank were friendly enough with the neighborhood teenagers to want to spend time in their homes, claim best friends among them, and girlfriends among their friends’ sisters. We all found our groups.

I thought that Ricky and I still did not care about girlfriends. But I was going to find out later that Ricky did.

Ricky and I got friendly with the younger children in the neighborhood soon after we moved in. We were all about the same age, give or take a year or two.

Michael and Eric, Robert and Nick were part of the group with my brother Ricky and me. And there was Anthony, a little older, and mean. He hardly ever played with us because he was a bully and we did not really want to be bullied by him. As it happened, Anthony’s ways ended in tragedy. He was a youth about whom we could only see the downside, a life we could not lament.

The other boys were our good friends. Michael and Nick may have been a bit younger. Eric was the same age as me, while Ricky and Robert were the older children in my group of friends. Michael was my best friend. I would walk to school with him most days. Though on the face of it his parents were not very different to mine, I thought of his house as the safest, though if I had to make a quick getaway, it had to be Eric’s because he was next door.

Eric lived in a larger, grander house than we did. I felt a little awkward in his house, even when I had been asked over. Eric always went to school in his car. His parents made sure that one or the other of them drove their children to school before they set out to go to work. His parents would ask Ricky and me if we would like to go with them when the weather was rough. I would get into Eric’s car for the ride on days like that, but Ricky preferred to walk, even when it rained.

Ricky was brilliant in many ways. Our friends’ group thought so. His teachers in school and peers in church thought that he was really good. There were some who thought of Ricky as a ‘softy.’ I had seen Ricky when our older brothers and bullies set on him. I would have thought this true because of those incidents. But there was a side to Ricky that only I knew about. He and I were supposed to share a couple of things besides our bedroom, but Ricky knew my vulnerabilities inside out. He got to choose the better part of the bedroom as his, he got to wear the better clothes though Mom had told us that we should share our clothes and toys. And he got me to do his share of the housework because otherwise, he threatened to say that the fault lay with me, that I was the shirker. He said that Mom might ground both of us for that, but I would suffer more.

Ricky was troubled. Our elder brothers could turn on him any minute when Mom and Raymond were not around. He could not get away from what they did to him. Ricky seemed to vent his frustrations on me by doing the similar stuff to me when no one in the family was looking or were there. Our group of friends of course knew, but they left us alone.

They, and more so their parents, probably thought that our family was strange. Our parents were hardly ever there and not as sociable as the neighborhood would have liked them to be – particularly Mom. Then, Dennis and Frank spelt trouble. They were every mother’s nightmare about what older teenage boys should not be.

The boys our own age probably thought that the fights between Ricky and me (which Ricky always won) were family matters, best dealt with if overlooked. Their mothers and fathers probably thought of us and Dennis and Frank, in particular, as the troublesome lot.

My friends, Ricky and I all went to the Molly Dawson Elementary School. My friend Nick and I had hit it off since my very first day at Molly Dawson Elementary School kindergarten. He didn’t live nearby, but since we had grown up together from age three or four, a couple of blocks did not make a great deal of difference. Nick lived with his grandparents who gave him a great deal of love and attention.

 At the time of this story I was in the fourth grade and Ricky in the sixth grade at Molly Dawson. We got about mostly on foot. All of us kids who walked to school would take a shortcut behind Michael’s house. I would collect Michael from home, cross a tree-lined creek and we would then carry on up the main road to school.

I was also aware that all of my friends liked me, that they let me decide for them about games to play and where and when to get together. They often asked Ricky and me over. Ricky did not usually go to their houses with me, but I did. I sometimes felt that I was the leader of our little group.

As I said, Raymond talked to me and took me out and about South Austin. He knew I liked to run, so he once took me to the running track at St Edward’s University. I ran that track as I never had before. It was the best thing he had ever done for me. Some day, I told myself, I was going to run world marathons. But at the time, I ran as much as I could around Ben Howell Drive, around school and on occasion from our house to school on Eric’s parents’ driving route.

Shelia complained that my running was keeping me horribly thin. But she did not say this often. There was possibly another reason why I was thin. What food there was in the house would usually get eaten by Dennis and Frank when they were there. Shelia worked at engraving at Sear’s all day and only got home at six in the evening. She would then cook our dinner, though that would usually get polished by our family of six.

Shelia talked little, struggled to control my older brothers and seemed distracted a lot of the time. I know she loved all of us and grieved for Ricky a great deal when he passed away, but she found it difficult to relate to people all her life, whether family or acquaintances. She did not remember matters small and major. She did not know or else she did not remember which grades my brothers and I were in, at school. She would ask me every year, at the beginning of the year, which grade I was in. I would tell her, but I guessed that she would forget again.

There were a couple of things I was not good at. I could not get my words out as I would have liked to. Shelia frowned at my stutter, though Raymond and my neighborhood friends ignored it. My brothers would tease me and mimic me incessantly. Most of all, I was scared that my stutter would not go away when I most wanted it to…in class and with my teachers.

I was not good at schoolwork and I was not good to any authority at school. I (and my classmates) would rather play the fool than follow what was going on in class. I was not very keen about what should have been going on in class. I know I got failing grades but somehow made it to the next grade at the end of the year. I had a suspicion at the time that this was because my teachers could not bear the thought of having me all over again.

Then, I was awfully scared of the dark and anything that was responsible for making it dark. I was scared of the huge hole in the ground on the lot next door.

Ricky, on the other hand, was a good student and his teachers loved him.

Our smallish green painted house in the middle of the street was similar to the others on Ben Howell Drive except for Eric and Robert’s grand homes. It had full grown green leafy trees at the back and low hedges all around. The house was small, but topped our neighbors’ homes because of its high foundation. There was a three foot gap between the foundation of the house and the ground at the bottom.

From the outside, the two front doors gave it the appearance of a duplex, particularly the door on the side of the bedroom I shared with Ricky. We always used the door to the living room. The other door led to the bedroom I shared with Ricky. This front door was generally not used.

We entered through the front yard and porch into a living room which led first to a small kitchen. My parents’ bedroom was off the kitchen. Two adjoining bedrooms were straddled by a small bathroom which all of us used. After Candle Face asserted herself this bathroom and the small bathroom mirror would provide the basis of an investigation. Needless to say, the investigation provided evidence, but none of it conclusive.

The large screened porch at the back led to the backyard. I was there on one occasion that I’m going to tell you about, at something like three or four in morning, when I should have drunk my glass of water and gone back to bed. The rest of the time the grassy, tree-lined backyard was part of our play area.

Our front yard was adequate and much like the other front yards of houses on our street, but the backyard was much larger and had an old garage in the corner which was to provide the wrong kind of shelter for my brothers on a day they decided to be active. The huge trees in the back gave us cover through sunshine and shadow. Actually, mostly shadow. I now recall that it was a dark place, even in the middle of the afternoon. A good place to play hide and seek.

It was a regular street in South Austin. But I had noticed the strange bits – one was a large boxy building up the street. When I asked, I was told that it was the phone company. When I was growing up I was told that Austin was a big city and the capital of Texas. All of us at Molly Dawson Elementary who lived near the telephone company were proud of being able to tell the others that we lived near the phone company. I had not travelled outside the city in my memory, and to me Austin, and South Austin, was the centre of the world.

The other very noticeable part of the street was the empty lot next door to our house. At first I thought about it as the neighborhood playground. When we played hide and seek in our dark backyard, it seemed natural to include this empty lot because it was there, practically joined to our yard. But as I grew older I noticed that it was not a real playground with swings or a sandpit. No one except for us children and people who wanted to park their junk bothered about it. The front of the lot had obviously not been tended for sometime, because tall grass grew here.

I seem to remember that it was my idea to cut the grass in front. All of us – my brother, I and my friends managed this. We fashioned scythes from the rusted metal bits at the back and cut the grass down till it nearly looked neat and well-kept. The next part was a little more difficult. We built a longish bicycle ramp and put it in position.

We now had something closer to a proper playground, even if it was missing the swings and slides. My friends and I decided that it had to be utilized well. I devised a cycling game which started a lot further up, from the other end of Ben Howell Drive. This was the end where it joined with Wilson Street. We had to pedal furiously down from somewhere near house number seven, turn sharply at the empty lot and point the front wheel of our bicycles up in the air before we came down right side up and wheels balanced on the ramp. I had it down in my head as the game of let’s-cycle-furiously-down-the-street, steer in and jump on to the ramp and down on our butts. It was dangerous, but the adults did not know and we did not care.

Then, there was an activity which we called a clover picnic. I remember my friend Michael and me down on all fours grazing the empty lot like cattle. We were looking for clover to eat. Our edible charms had to be four-leaved and luckily grew wild out in front. Michael and I loved the pickle taste, but the people on the other side thought we were crazy. They would shout this fact to us from their side of the street. Michael and I would look up, puzzled at first, and they would laugh at our clover-smudged lips and bulging cheeks. We would then do our best to ignore them and go back to the search for four-leaved clover.

The back of this otherwise empty lot was a grassless fire ant-filled mess. It was called an empty lot because there was no house on the lot. It did, however, have stuff like dirty mattresses with springs sticking out and other medium and large household junk which the original owners had simply thrown out. We salvaged what we could from this junk. Firstly, there were the grass-cutting implements. The bicycle ramp had been painstakingly built from flattened tins and a couple of old strollers and pushchairs. We would also build the tree house later from such treasure.

Then, there was the most unusual part of this strange empty lot. This was the huge wide hole in the back. At first, its existence could not be explained but none of us ever mentioned it. I just accepted that it was somehow a part of our play area, though I did not like the look of it and did my best to avoid it. So did the others in our group. It must have been five feet all around and went three feet straight down underground. From the day that I noticed it, I could not look at it without a small pinprick of fear. But such thoughts would be swept away when we children would sit out here to watch my brother perform up in the tree house at the back of the empty lot.

Ricky was undoubtedly talented. He was sure of his captive audience, whether in the empty lot or when he played the lead in church and school plays. Near home, he performed magic tricks and narrated ghost stories. We sat on the ground and watched and listened enraptured. It did not matter that we knew how those tricks worked, or that we had some stories of our own to tell. Some of the kids tried, but came nowhere near. We knew we preferred him. He simply was the best.

For Ricky’s performances we had at first balanced a four foot by four foot square board across the two largest branches above the wide tree trunk. The many branches were huge, much larger than the other trees around us. I thought of it as the largest tree for miles. It was our own trophy tree. We thought we just had to build that house up on the tree, never mind the hole not so far away. Our efforts gathered Momentum. At first it was just a board, then a tree house with a roof. Ultimately that tree house became a two storied tree house.

Later, I would regret starting with the board.

I can still picture all of us on the bare ground looking up at Ricky as he went about being the star, the magician and storyteller all rolled into one. It was the same audience under that most wonderful tree in the empty lot next door. Ricky was going to try to get a special girl to come and watch him do magic. But it never happened, and the rest of us did not allow girls near that tree and the tree house.

The neighbors from the house on the side opposite to mine were not as fascinated as we were, with our self-devised games and entertainment. They would call the cops if our playful noises rose above the softest roar. In fact, they routinely called the cops on us. We would run when the cops came and made us leave, then come back again when they had left. The cops would then be called again. It was hard work, leaving and coming back. But we were drawn to our empty lot play area and we knew that the cops would eventually tire of coming.

The woman of the house would sometimes come into the lot and threaten us with the police but we would just yell out, “Virgie is a virgin, Virgie is a virgin.” That always did the trick. Thinking back, we younger kids did not even know that this could have been a cruel taunt. My excuse now is that she would stop disturbing us when we yelled back at her. I should have been punished for taunting Virginia. Maybe circumstances did see to that.

My concern then was the scary large hole in the back. I asked my friends Robert and Eric why it was there. The first time I asked, they exchanged a look but did not say anything. I didn’t understand. They were my friends!

So we played bicycle hop, graze-the-clovers, hide and seek and its variation seek and hide, in dark spots. We admired our star performer and insisted that we did not need to go anywhere else for our entertainment and our games. We decided that the empty lot would be our only play area.

Sure, I kept dark secrets from my parents and from my friends. I knew a great deal about what Dennis and Frank could get up to. I berated myself because I seemed powerless to stop them getting at Ricky. By now I felt that I should be trying harder at school, even if Shelia had little idea about what I did there, the failing grades I was getting and the grade any of us were in. What I did not know was that circumstances, past and present, had other plans for us.

**Chapter 3**

For as long as I lived in our house, I was scared of that large hole in the back part of the lot next door. I had asked Eric and Robert when I was not quite eight years old, but I had not got an answer to my question about the hole in the ground in the empty lot next door. Why was it there? Why did I feel the way I felt about it? I also wondered why the empty lot next door existed.

 I asked my friends again when we were on the lot a couple of days later. Robert, older by two years, must have decided it was time for an explanation. But he had to step closer and talk in a whisper. Was it a secret, and who else could want to listen? “In the early ‘70s a house used to be on the lot but a fire burned it down,” was what he said.

This was news to me. I was taken aback and Robert’s words ran around inside my head. I could have asked a lot of questions then, but something stopped me. “A whole family died in the fire.” Eric added. A family? I thought. How many in the family? When did Eric get to know? He had not breathed a word of all this to me at any time in the last four years.

“Yeah, the father, mother, a baby boy, and a young girl. All of them died in the fire. It was no ordinary fire. It came from there…” and Robert pointed skywards. He was warming to his subject and carried on, “It was started by lightning in the middle of the night. The people who lived here…they did not know that their house was on fire. They died in their sleep because of all that smoke from the fire billowing around inside the house at night. It is called something like smoke ass-pick, I think

.

Ricky butted in “it’s called smoke asphyxiation. Their lungs must have filled up with smoke.” Robert glanced at Ricky. Was Ricky going to rob him of this one chance he had? He decided to carry on quickly without giving Ricky another chance, ”they had no other family, no relatives. The council did not want to pay for their funeral and for four places in a cemetery. There was no one who wanted to pick up the cost of all that for the whole family. So their bodies were buried right here.” Robert pointed straight to the hole.

This was more dramatic than I could have ever imagined! But I could not afford serious doubts, because now Michael backed up what Robert and Eric had just told us – and so did my brother Ricky Allen! I had been the only ‘baby’ who had not been told. Why, I thought, if I was their *de facto* leader? As far as Ricky was concerned, I had tried hard not to bother him so as not to draw any unwanted attention. But I did think that Ricky and I shared everything, besides our bedroom, toys and clothes. It turned out now that he had known a great deal about the empty lot next door that I did not. And, he probably knew about that hole and why it was there.

I was stung. “How do you know, Ricky? You didn’t live here when it happened. You may have not even been born,” I snapped at him.

Robert was growing more eloquent. Perhaps it was his only chance at being centre stage. “See, the city buried the bodies here and at night they come back alive. They leave you alone most of the time but all of them will hunt you down and kill you if you ever jump in the hole.”

Did I believe Robert’s story all the way? I would have to test him, “You’re just trying to scare us because you’re bigger and you know more.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he looked a little shamefaced, then perked up, “but the part about the city burying the bodies here is true, Ray. Why do you think I stay away from that hole? Why do you think I’ve made sure that you guys stay away from that hole?” But I knew why I had not had anything to do with that hole in the ground. I just didn’t like it. It had been slightly scary long before Robert, Eric and Ricky had come up with all this. Now it was going to be more so.

My best friend Michael and I looked at each other and then looked into the hole. We all looked into the hole. I kept telling myself that I hoped it was not true. But there had to be *some* explanation for the empty lot next door with a huge ugly hole in the ground. I was determined to get to the bottom of this story I had just been told by my friends and my brother. I had to, in the hope that the explanation could be different. I hoped to make myself less scared about that hole in the ground.

We might have given our adopted playground a break for a few days, but we went back to playing in the empty lot and to Ricky’s performances in the tree house. But now my friends and I did even more to avoid the area around the great big hole at the back. Some of Ricky’s ghost stories began to focus on the lost family who had lived in the house on the empty lot. They were macabre tales of their skeletons coming out at night and roaming the streets of South Austin as they sought their skins. The ghosts wanted to regain their original looks, he explained. Luckily (according to Ricky), they had failed till now in this mission and would re-enter their resting place by the time the first rays of the early morning sun arrived. Ricky had a way with words. We shivered as we listened to the same story over and over again, with small changes in the storyline.

Days, maybe months and years passed. I had moved into our house when I was four years old and was eleven now. The last three years had been a busy time. We still walked to school by the usual route. I had managed to scrape by every grade and thought that I knew a lot more. I was testing out for football and athletics. I suppose I liked school better for its track and field events.

At home, things had not changed a lot. Both my parents still had the same jobs and worked as long hours. Raymond left early in the morning, before Ricky and I had woken up. Mom would wake us. I slept soundly enough to have to have her yell at me to wake up, some mornings. She would put our breakfast on the table and leave. Ricky and I ate as quickly as we could if Dennis and Frank were around, and sometimes not at all, if our older brothers had other ideas about who should get the cereal and who not.

Dennis and Frank had graduated to high school but Shelia was still not sure which grade they were in now, and what they would do with themselves after high school. My friends and I had had a great time just being together over the last three years. Maybe we indulged ourselves less with the bicycle game and the clover picnic. We told ourselves that we preferred ball games and those were better played in school.

Ricky had grown better and very sure at his ability to entertain. We still went to the empty lot for those, a couple of days a week. He now excelled in magic shows and occasionally called on me to be his assistant. I loved that. We still tried to keep the empty lot as tidy as possible, for what we needed it for. The lady across the road must have by now realized that we were not little kids any more. The people in the house on the other side of the empty lot from us still raged at us and called the police. The police, though, had got used to us and our ways. They gave us a wink and a smile on the occasions when they turned up.

The one thing that had changed was that I was by now even more wary of the hole in the ground. The grass inside it had grown quite high. We did not bother to trim the grass in that bit. I had heard about the possible tragedy in the lot next door some years later from people the same age as me. My friends had speculated about the family who may have died there. For a long time I did not know what to believe and whether a family had died when their house caught fire. I wondered how I could best unravel the story.

I was by now a lot older than eight, when I had first heard the story. Ricky’s story-telling talents had practically brought those people (and their ghosts) in the family who had died, to our attention. What I needed was for someone to fill in a lot of facts for me. I did not need any more speculation from my group of friends or from Ricky. I had decided to ask my parents.

I had given some thought about how and when to ask either Shelia or Raymond. Their lives had been based on hard work and solid facts. I did not want my stutter to come in the way of my query. I rehearsed what and how to ask them and finally got enough courage to ask my father during dinner what he knew about the empty lot next door. It was now 1985 and I was eleven, but I was still nervous. “P-p-a, why is there an empty l-lot next door?”

I could feel all eyes on me. Dennis and Frank looked incredulous and faintly amused. Ricky was looking at me steadily, as though to say that he did not know I had it in me to ask outright – not when I was Raymond’s favorite in his opinion, and could have asked for anything, anyhow. Shelia was looking wary.

Raymond looked around and cleared his throat. Five pairs of eyes switched to him while I stared at my empty plate. “There used to be a house there but it was destroyed by a fire,” Raymond said, slowly and clearly.

It was true then, the story that Robert and Eric and Ricky had come up with all those years ago! My mind was in a whirl. The grown-ups had known as well, but what exactly was true, and what not?

It was just me who did not know, or did not know whether to believe all that had been going around. I had half not believed Robert and Ricky when I was younger. But my father had just confirmed the main part of the story. I could not ask him if there was any truth in the stories about what happened to the family after they died. I could not very well give away what was said when Ricky and my friends spent time together!

 I found my nerve and decided to give it a try. Or else, I would never know, I thought. “How about the f-family? Did they die, and d-d-did our city bury them properly? They may not have had anyone – relatives or f-f-f-friends. I heard one of other children say in school that if that happens, the council are free to bury people anywhere (this was, strictly speaking, not true). They would not have buried the bodies in the back, would they?” I asked. My eyes were as big as they could get.

My father laughed at this scenario. “Bodies in the back yard?” He laughed again. It was rare to see my father laugh, but I had given him something to go on. I was annoyed that my stutter had given me away. Raymond had guessed my fear and found it funny. I was beginning to wonder why I had asked at all. I was eleven years old now. Why could I not just accept those tragic events and get on with whatever I had to do? That was when I reminded myself – I had not been sure.

The next question I asked myself, was what *did* I have to do to get on? There was of course my schoolwork. I was still getting away without doing my homework. Ricky did his, in all that time he spent in our room. I wondered if I could quietly get away to our bedroom after dinner, away from this fun at my cost. I also knew the answer to that – “no.” Our bedroom was, first of all, Ricky’s domain. If I went there, he might just get down to teasing me outright. What else could I do?

I had the answer to that, “run.” In the last couple of years I had been doing a lot more running. It kept me away from people. I did not have to carry on explaining myself. Raymond and I had carried on watching TV together, but with less of the conversations we used to have. Raymond’s ways were telling on me.

But running was something I could do and I could say that I loved it. Running I could do. Years later, in high school, I was ranked fourth in America in the 5000 meters at 15:38. I could go on in this way, but strictly speaking, this is not part of this story. At the time when I started, I loved the feel of my feet pounding on the sidewalk or on a proper running track. I loved the feel of the wind in my hair. My hair! My hands crept up to my head as I felt automatically for my red Budweiser cap.

Raymond had told me that I should not wear it to the dinner table. That I should not have my head covered when Ricky said grace before a meal. I looked around. Everyone except Shelia and me, had taken up the topic of what had happened next door many years ago, sometime that had taken place long before we arrived at No. 3 Ben Howell Drive.

I looked around again. Both my brothers had their baseball caps on. Mom must have decided to ignore the three of us. Three misdemeanors were a bit much to have to tackle all at once. I could never understand why my parents did not bother to explain any concerns Ricky and I had. But Mom had concerns of her own and cut in at this point. Her scolding was directed at me, “Where did you ever hear a story like that?”

Raymond was laughing while he carried on, “No, they did not bury any bodies in the back. I think only one person died in that fire...” “Stop. You are going to scare the children.” This again from Shelia.

Our normally quiet dinner was getting animated, and it was all my doing. Dennis glanced at me, grimaced and said, “It’s OK, all of us on this street know the story, give or take a couple of details. The fire they died in was started by lightning. The people in the house were caught unawares because it was night time and they were asleep. Everyone in the big ground floor bedroom managed to escape. The couple who lived there had a baby boy in a crib. They picked him up and rushed out. But a child who slept upstairs was caught in the fire and the smoke from the fire. She died and we are quite sure that she is buried in the hole at the back.”

I was amazed all over again. Everyone knew about what had happened to turn the house and yard next door into an empty lot. My brothers knew what had happened to the people who had once lived there. That baby boy that Robert had told me about might just be in Molly Dawson Elementary School by now, provided he had lived through the fire and still lived in South Austin. And the girl who died….she might be my age, had she not died.

I tried to pull myself back from such thoughts. I was just being silly. My counselor in school had said that eleven was a tough age, never mind the teens. But my thoughts carried on yo-yoing. A girl my age next door? She would still not be allowed in the tree house. And then I remembered that had that family carried on living next door, we would not have had the empty lot to play in, or build a tree house on that great tree. All of it would have been theirs…hers, rather.

But by now Mom was really annoyed with Dennis. “That’s enough. Stop,” she yelled. She had had it, with us. Shelia looked straight at the three of us in turn and said, “and take those silly caps off. I will not have these at the table. We will say a prayer when we leave this table tonight, as Ricky did when he said grace in Spanish. This time we will include that child who died, in our prayers.”

I noticed that my mother and I had been the only ones not laughing. Everyone stopped when Shelia said her bit. I rose from the table with Dennis’ voice still ringing in my ears. Robert had added some extra detail to his version. Dennis sounded more convincing. He knew, and all of my family knew all the gory details all this time! Mom might have known too. Knowing her, it would be only natural that she had kept it to herself. It was too much for me to deal with at this instant at the dinner table. I thought I might have a heart attack.

I had a great deal more to figure out, but did not dare ask just now. If I did, I knew that my stutter would be at its worst. I would just have to find the answers for myself.

**Chapter 4**

Later that night I was in my bath thinking about those people who had lived next door. Again, I wondered what they could have been like. A mother and father, a girl maybe my age and a baby boy. Wouldthey have been like our family or like Eric’s or anyone else from school?

I had been obsessed about the family, the lot next door and the hole at the back for too long. I also thought about the bodies in the hole. I decided I would carefully contrive not to go near it and just before I fell asleep at night. Was I obsessed about that hole in the ground and one or more bodies in there! I was determined try and get to the bottom of the mystery of its existence. Or else, I told myself, the fact of the empty lot next door would haunt me forever.

My older brothers had tried to scare Ricky and me, some months ago with a ghost story about an English Queen called Bloody Mary. We had tried to tell them that we weren’t really scared, even if the English Queen had really existed. Dennis and Frank insisted that not only had Queen Mary been real once upon a time, she had reasons to be infamous. Mary’s religion had forced her into a huge argument with a great many people from he own country. She had thought that they should have their heads chopped off because they did not go to the same church as she did. Dennis and Frank looked straight at Ricky and me when they said this, probably because in our family we were the most regular church-goers.

We asked Dennis and Frank if the queen had turned into a ghost. They said that she had when she died, but that was only because she had not managed to kill all the people she did not like. Queen Mary had gone down in history (they had this on authority from their history teacher) for chopping off the heads of nearly 300 people.

They had not given up, and said that there was a way of proving that in her ghostly guise she still roamed the earth, but whoever proved this right would die. They had talked of the way that this could be proven.

My eleven year old brain had absorbed the facts. It went like this: go into the bathroom and turn off the light (it had to be completely dark), face the mirror and say out loud, “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary.” If the ghost was there, I would see her in the mirror standing behind me before she killed me. My eleven year old’s reason, though, told me that if I tried this and Bloody Mary really appeared in the bathroom mirror, it would prove that other ghosts could arise from improperly buried bodies.

I jumped out of the tub, tried to gather my wits and stood in front of the small mirror. My heart was beating faster than ever but now I brushed aside all thoughts of a heart attack. I had never wound myself up this much. The teasing and laughter I had got from my family made me even more determined. I told myself that I needed to know any truth – first, about Bloody Mary, even if it meant death. The next proof, I thought, could be derived from this.

I had to walk some steps to the light switch near the door. Would I be able to will myself to turn it off? I planned my steps back to the mirror (there were just four) and counted to three in front of the light switch.

“1...2...3...” I turned off the lights and carefully walked in the direction of the mirror trying to keep my mind blank, since stray thoughts would be likely to make me change my mind. I felt a little stupid, but managed to get into position and say out loud, “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary.” I had done this perfectly.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The thumping seemed to come from outside. I jumped. This made me slip on the wet floor. I thought I was dead. But instead of nothingness, my thoughts rushed back. It was Bloody Mary coming to kill me.

“Hey, what are you doing in there?” I realized in the next couple of seconds that It was Raymond on the other side of the bathroom door. “Why do you have the lights off?” He asked.

I would not be able to explain myself. I hesitated, then said, “Huhh, nothing,” There had not been enough time for me to come up with any excuse.

“You weren’t having a bath on the floor in a bathroom with the lights off, were you? Come on, get out.” Raymond was not amused as he had been during dinner. He was annoyed.

I was pleased to learn that Bloody Mary was not real but now I had to face my father the disciplinarian. I got out.

I got right back to my room, sat on my bed despite Ricky noisily airing his opinion of me, and thought a bit more about what had just happened. Ricky was saying that I was an idiot for bringing up all that about the people next door. He was worried that he may not be allowed to carry on with his shows in the treehouse. He was threatening to discontinue my services as the magician’s assistant.

But I was not in a mood to be threatened just now. I was elated. What I had proved in the bathroom had sunk in. I thought through Ricky’s noises of censure, “if Bloody Mary is fake, then the story about many bodies or even one body buried in the hole is a lie. Like I had told Robert some years ago, these stories are made up just to scare kids.”

I felt like a million dollars. I *had* got to the truth. I had cracked the case about the empty lot next door with its huge ugly hole. I had proved to myself that the ghost of Bloody Mary did not exist. That meant that people did not turn into ghosts just like that, whether they had been good or bad. Look at Mary. There was no one I knew who could be that wicked.

I told myself that this meant that there was not a single body in the hole next door, which could have turned into a ghost.

“But wait,” I said to myself. “Just like I tested the Bloody Mary story, I have to confirm the story about the people who lived in house next door. They might have lived except for the girl, like Raymond and Dennis said. Then again, they might have all died in the fire, like the kids in our group had insisted on.” I asked myself if I believed in ghosts. I was not sure. But if I did, I wanted to know if there was just one child ghost, or the family. In a macabre way, I even thought of the TV program I watched with Raymond, *All in the family.* What if the producers extended the story into a ghostly one? Then everyone in that family would be ghosts. Archie’s silly opinions would not matter at all. That would please Raymond. This was an idea for Ricky, but since he was still trying to put me in my place, I decided that I would not discuss this with him.

I would show Ricky ultimately, I decided. It would help if I proved something – anything about the people in the house next door. The common consensus was that whether it was the one, or more that had died in that fire, they may have been buried in that fearful hole in their back yard. I had to think carefully about how to prove this story right or wrong.

There was no one I could ask. I would have to rely on myself. As with Bloody Mary, I would have to test for this ghost (or ghosts). I was sure about this now. But later, I would wonder if I could not have just left it alone. I was not wise.

I prepared carefully for what I had in mind. I wanted to go and inspect that hole in the empty lot next door. It would be best done at night, when I could do a thorough job without being disturbed. The only problem was that it was awfully dark and I was scared of the dark. I told myself that I could not have it both ways. That I had to appreciate the convenience of a dark night. And that I could if I tried, break that taboo I had about the dark. What better than a real live experience?

Later that night I went outside. I waited a long while, steeling myself and looking up at the sky. There were no stars so it must have been cloudy. After awhile I shimmied up a tree. It was not *that* tree, but had bark that I could get a good grip on. Among its many branches, there was a long thick low hanging branch which stretched across to the empty lot next door. I sat on this branch, then edged along it carefully to stare deep into the darkness of the lot. I told myself that it did not scare me. I thought I had overcome my fear of the darkness.

Next, I willed myself to think about that forbidding hole. I thought about how silly it would be to have bones in that stupid hole and human bones at that. I thought about how stupid I was for being half persuaded by such a story. I was determined to find out. I told myself that I needed the truth.

That the truth could be different to that dictated by my new-found confidence scared me. The next instant, I was not so sure. This trend of thought was compounded when the tree branches began to ruffle. I looked up through the darkness and thought that I could see a hanging body twitch somewhere deep, near the top of the tree. I had had enough of this adventure.

Before I changed my mind and turned around, I told myself that it was just my long standing fear of the dark and the night that was making me see things, fuelling my imagination. Shapes appeared different when there was not enough light to reflect off them, I reminded myself. It may have been a small nugget of information I had retained from a science class, but I was glad for my rational line of thought.

I had played here often enough with my friends in the course of the last seven years. I had run around the larger area to improve my skill at running marathons. It was just an empty lot, no matter about the ghoulish stories. I picked up a large stick, hopped off the low branch and headed into the lot.

It was not easy. I managed to reach the edge of the hole with my heart racing a mile a minute. I peeked in, but now, in the darkness, there was no way that I could fathom the bottom of that five foot wide hole in the ground. My eyes started to adjust to the darkness and I turned round to look back at the tree I had used as a bridge. The hanging body was gone. I did not know it then, but what I had seen was to be an omen.

Right now, in the dark on the edge of the hole, I thought to myself, “There is no way that the city would just bury the bodies – or body, here. We have rules and a constitution. Something like this just doesn’t happen in America in the 1980s.”

I pumped up my courage and at first ran around the rim. I had never come this close. Then, I screwed up my eyes, held my breath and jumped into the hole. It came to somewhere above my knees. The earth didn’t stop. Ghosts didn’t jump out. No one complained about being disturbed. My heart was not doing a flip-flop as it had at dinnertime. But now, there was far less reaction than there had been even an hour or two ago. Nothing happened. I found my voice. “This story has to be bullshit too,” I said out loud.

I felt liberated from fears of my own making. I did not have to be afraid anymore. My friends may have accepted me as their leader, but now I could get my family to look up to me…. and maybe the people in school who knew about my failing grades. I had lessons to teach them from life, tell them how I had bravely disproved a nasty rumor, hadn’t I?

I was elated. I could tell everyone the truth, just as Dennis had expanded on what he knew. They would know that it was … just a nasty rumor. I would no longer be nervous and have to stutter when I asked my friends, and even my family, about any incident I needed to find out more about. I would not have to creep around in the dark to keep my investigation private, as I was doing now. Everybody would assume that I was methodical in my investigations. That I had disproved the lie for what it was.

My mind raced on. Ricky would not be the only one from my family to hold friends spellbound in the tree house, or on the school stage or in our church. I knew that I could never do what Ricky did, but I could impress them with my singular achievement. They would then hold me in some esteem! I could take on the world.I started to poke at the bottom of the hole with the stick. Nope, no ghosts, I told myself.

Standing in that hole, my behavior towards any spirits became even more exaggerated. I called out to them. I dared them, “Show yourself! Where are you- you b-burnt out ghosts?” I listened carefully for a response but none came.

I had made my first mistake, but didn’t know that at the time, so I carried on railing, “the story about you is bullshit!” I said. I clambered out of the hole and walked straight back to the house. Ricky had completed his elaborate preparations before he went to bed and had fallen asleep with the light on. I changed and switched off the light and just before I got into my bed I did a little jig. No one could have been watching, not Ricky, at least. I said my prayers. The last thing I thought of that night just before I slept was that I was the bravest eleven-year-old in the world.

**Chapter 5**

Something disturbed me while I slept, I know. I still remember all these years later that the time on the digital clock showed 3:27 a.m. My brother Ricky was talking in his sleep again. That might have been what had woken me up. I could not hear what he said. He may have been practicing a story, or he could have been narrating what he was

dreaming about. In any case, he was no longer sleeping his peaceable sleep as he had earlier in the night when I had gone to bed. His talk was too low for me to distinguish what he was saying. Ricky did this about twice a week. He had nightmares sometimes. On those nights he would mumble, thrash and squirm around in bed but he would never wake up.

I was thirsty…and a little hungry too, to be honest. I got up and walked into the kitchen to get some water. I kept to the middle of my path because I had gone back to not trusting the dark corners and sides where the floor joined with the wall. I was also slightly ashamed of this, after that practice session earlier that night to help me ward off my fear of the dark. But here safe at home, my old fear of the dark strangely enough, came flooding back. I thought about switching on the kitchen light, but left it alone because I did not want to disturb my parents. Their bedroom opened from the kitchen and they usually left their door open. I would have to get my water and get back to bed quietly, if I did not want to face the dozen questions I would have to answer if they awoke.

I could see in the semi-dark now; there was enough light coming in from the backyard through the kitchen window. I could hear the tree leaves rustling, the branches swaying. It was a windy night.

I stood still. What was that screechy-scratchy noise? Not Bloody Mary again! She had lived centuries ago and in a very far away place across an ocean, Dennis had said. I had proved that his stories were all made up. But, what *was* that dull screech? It took me a few minutes of listening and watching the shadow of the branches to realize that a couple of branches were scraping the outside of the house along the board and window screen. The noise was like long finger nails on a chalk board.

I had been told that I was tall. But I had to stand on tiptoe now to get a better look out of the window. The greatest tree was swaying madly, its branches twisting over each other in that half light. So was the one I had climbed, to reach the empty lot earlier that night. If trees had arms instead of branches, they were swaying to the rhythm of an unknown song. Both the trees looked like they were ready to uproot themselves and fly away like untidy magic carpets. I was truly worried about the double storied tree house. I hoped that the fruits of our labor would not get dislodged and that it would stay. The smaller trees and low bushes in the back were also quivering restlessly. At the time of my investigation it had seemed cloudy up there. I was glad that I had got all that out of the way when I did. The backyard looked forbidding just now.

I hoped that there was not going to be a storm. I did not care for thunder, or even lightning, particularly at night. It would make me want to get back and burrow down in my bed with my sheet for comfort. When I was ten, a bad storm had driven me into my parents’ bedroom. I had woken them up at night and had been the butt of family jokes for days after that.

I took a good look at the empty lot. I thought of my experiment towards the truth and my activities around and in the hole some hours ago. That had been fun…in the end. Why on earth had I been frightened of the hole for all these years since I’d heard Robert, Eric and Ricky’s story, I could not imagine. I should have checked it a long time ago. I was confident enough to check it every night now if I had to. Why was I having to build up courage to have to look towards it now? I did that, held my breath and glanced straight at the hole.

I could put it down to still sleepy eyes, but were my eyes playing tricks on me again? I had to look away, rub my eyes and look back at the hole in that semi-darkness. There it was again! A dark figure standing half in and half out of the hole. My mind raced while I tried to match it to something - a dog, a large raccoon, or even the neighborhood skunk? What could it be? My heart kept pace with my thoughts. No, a raccoon would have got lost in the three feet depth of the hole. Not even a dog could stand that high.

I backed off from the window and reminded myself that I was brave… had I not carried out an investigation some hours ago? But some things had changed since then. It was really late at night now. My mad jumping up and down, the shouting and raving may have woken something or somebody who was best left alone. I would have to find out for myself. I would definitely have to investigate more thoroughly. I would have to go out to the back porch for a better view.

Slowly and hopefully noiselessly, I walked past my parent’s bedroom to the door leading to the porch at the back. I swung the unlocked backdoor open. I left the porch lights off – I could now see still better. I could see both the backyards clearly now without having to peer through a high window, but had to carry on tippy-toeing to the corner of the porch. I had vantage view of the back of the empty lot. There it was again.

I can only describe what I saw then, as something close to being a young girl. From what little I could see, the girl was unlike any I had seen in real life. She seemed to be standing in the hole, had long unkempt hair nearly down to her waist and was facing away from me.

But I was again having trouble trying to breathe, and to stop my thumping heart from bursting out. Stray thoughts flitted across my head, “I am dreaming! This can’t be real!” I would have to stop, to unscramble my thoughts and feelings. But once it had started, the figure had no trouble getting going. It was moving in a manner that I had never seen before. It flayed its arms and placed long bony fingers on the outside, along the side of the hole. It seemed to be trying hard to hold onto the edge as it hauled itself out of the hole. It managed this after what seemed to be ages, while my mind told my heart to calm down. It crawled on all fours on the ground away from me towards the tree with the tree house.

It had taken two minutes from the edge of the hole to the tree. The thing seemed to dig its nails and fingers into the trunk to pull itself upright. It partially managed this, though it still seemed to be clinging on to the tree for support. It seemed to have been a long time since the girl (if it was that) had stood on its own legs. I could hear a nasty gurgling sound from the figure. Could it be trying to draw in air? I realized that it was intent on getting on to the tree house.

I was going to face a worse problem now. Eric’s dog in the house on the other side of ours woke up. He may have been disturbed by that choked gurgling noise. Or else, he had sensed something. Eric’s pet was docile and friendly in the daytime. I loved him and he was my friend. Whenever we met he would wag its tail and try a big hug with its paws on my shoulder. We were about the same height.

But now it started to bark and howl. The girl-thing by the tree did not exactly turn her head around to look, but snapped her head back towards the sound of the barking dog. If you drew an imaginary straight line, I was right in the middle between that figure and the dog. All this time I had been mesmerized and motionless. Now I was more than terrified as the figure seemed to be looking straight at me.

It seemed to be as surprised as I had been, when I first set eyes on it. It now managed to turn its whole body around. I was also looking at her. Earlier, when Dennis had mentioned her at the dinner table, I had thought of her as I would about a girl who had once lived next door. But now I felt repelled. My mind was racing ahead, as usual. Could ghosts and ghouls be true?

I could see no color on her. I could only see that disheveled hair, half of which was hanging down her face. I could not see her face. I could, however, barely make out the rest of her. She was not a skeleton either. She was just dirty and patchy, covered in what could have been tatters – or long, dried grassy clods.

She was attempting to walk with a stumbling, unsteady gait towards the fence between my backyard and the empty lot. She (if it was a girl once) was old enough, but seemed to be learning how to walk all over again. It would pick up and flop one foot in front, drag the other till the last minute when it managed to pick that up and flop that down, in front.

Its course on all fours had taken less time. Why was it trying to walk away from the tree now? I answered myself. It seemed to want a better look – at me. I managed to force my thoughts this time - this ‘thing’ surely could not see me? But my hopes were fading as it got closer. My eyes! As I strained them, I felt that they were going to pop out. I could not see its eyes, but when it reached the fence I sensed a piercing gaze aimed straight at me. The fence was only ten feet away.

I did not want a closer look myself, but could now see it better. The wild, disheveled looking girl was about my age. I could still not make out the face or the color of her long hair or what she might be wearing.

“Could this be the little girl who I had heard about? Was she the one who had died in the fire and was buried in the hole?” I thought to myself. She looked at me and shook her head up and down in a ‘yes.’ Were my thoughts whispering into her ears? Could she hear me? Her frightful, hoarse laugh seemed like an apt reply.

I could not be dreaming. Because by now it was not just Eric’s dog, but all the dogs in our locality. They were barking loudly as dogs do, at an unknown intruder. The dogs’ response made me think that this was real. And that, in turn, made me realize that I had to save myself. I had to come out of my frozen, horrified state. I jumped, turned and ran for the door. The laughing behind me got louder. It understood. It was mocking me.

I opened my eyes to a bright bedroom. My mother had just shaken me awake and gone back to her room to get ready to leave for work. Ricky was already up and halfway through getting dressed for school. My head reeled. I still had to know. I didn’t stop to think before I asked Ricky if he had seen or heard anything unusual last night. He gave me an off hand “no” and told me that he would tell Mom if I did not get up right away.

I put it down to a bad dream. How could I otherwise explain being in the back porch, and then waking up in my own bed in my own bedroom?

I got up and went to school as I usually did. School was also normal. I did not pay attention to school work which is normal for me. I know I drove one of my teachers to distraction by refusing to understand the sums she had taken such pains to explain. She eventually gave up and rushed out of the classroom in a state.

All I was thinking about was the awful nightmare I had about the night before. That girl and her disheveled, faceless staring look, her crablike crawl to the tree, her attempt to stand and walk. That she could sense or hear the frantic neighborhood dogs and the fact that that through that stare she had seemed to be able to fathom my thoughts.

Would I ever feel as safe as I had before last night when I next ran my neighborhood track? And would I feel as I had before, knowing or dreaming about the hideous horror could emerge from that five foot hole in the backyard of the empty lot?

It went over and over in my head right through school. I tried to console myself that it was just a dream. A dream like Ricky had probably been putting up with for ages. This was no good, because of my clear memory of that dream. So this went on all day. As did the fact that I had proven that Bloody Mary was a fake. What if challenging any bodies in the hole last night had not been a good way to prove anything, even though nothing had happened at the time?

After school Ricky said that he was going to hold a magic show at the tree house. Most of the neighborhood kids showed up to watch Ricky perform. Ricky wanted to prepare things for his show and got to the tree house first, to do this. All of us were crowding around, avoiding the hole but looking for vantage areas to on the ground so as to get the best view for Ricky’s show. Michael and I walked past the hole. I could not stop myself from glancing in. I need not have worried this afternoon, because I didn’t notice anything unusual. It had to have been a dream. I needed the reassurance now and gave in to it. I quickly joined the others, sat down and watched my brother’s amazing show.

Today, the master had decided to add special movement to entertain us. He moved like a robot and acted like a mime all-in-one. We were thrilled and were sure that he was better than the best TV artistes. Ricky even raised a curtain to shield himself from the audience. In the next split second the curtain fell and Ricky was gone. That was his favorite trick. The kids yelled and clapped.

“How did he do that?” Nick yelled.

I was still smarting from Ricky’s lack of response in the morning when I had tried to talk to him. I knew the secret of Ricky’s homemade stage and could give it away. “Look Nick! We made an escape hatch. He opens it when the curtain is hiding him. When he’s off the stage, he pulls this string and the curtain falls. It’s really simple.” I said to Nick.

“Stop ruining it for everyone” Ricky shouted at me from inside his hiding area.

I was merciless now. “Here is Ricky’s hiding area.” As I pointed, I slowed down. I had just seen what appeared to be long blond hair stuck to the tree. I stepped closer and noticed claw marks; it looked like someone’s claws had raked the tree bark.

I pulled the hair away from the tree and looked at it up close. It was human hair. My hair was blond but short. Hair this long could only mean one thing – a girl. Eric’s sister had medium length blonde hair, but she avoided the places we played in. One of our rules were that girls were not allowed in or near our tree house. In any case none of the neighborhood girls had blonde hair as long as this.

Whose hair could this be?” It quickly dawned on me that while I had been telling myself that it was just a bad dream last night, here was evidence that it had been real. And the claw marks on the bark. Those were real too!

The girl who had died in what was now an empty lot had managed to climb out of her hole, crawled to the tree and had then stumbled towards me! I should not have made that visit to her resting place after dinner. She had heard me and it must have disturbed and offended her. I had called out to a ghost to show itself. She had done just that. I should not have called her a burnt-out ghost. I deeply regretted it, but it was too late now.

**Chapter 6**

Anthony was a boy who lived in a house up the street on Ben Howell Drive. He fitted in between my brothers Ricky and Frank in age. I did not know of anyone in the same grade as him at Molly Dawson Elementary, but I did know that he was in our school. He sometimes walked to school with us and considered himself a friend. But most of the time Anthony would go to school on a skateboard which belonged to his cousin. That meant that he had to take the long way round. It also meant that he had to share the road with other traffic. Our group of friends did not know him well. We were happy to leave Anthony to his own ways.

Anthony seemed happy enough in the house he lived in with his cousins Nancy, Eddie and Emmanuel. Dennis and Frank spent a lot of time in their house, but mostly in the garage. They practiced their music here and talked of getting a music group together. We could hear the Pink Floyd type of music wafting across from Eddie’s garage and hoped that the people in the houses between Eddie’s and ours would not complain about the noise of the music, as they did about our games. Eddie, Dennis and Frank spent a lot of time together though Eddie was not a lot like Dennis and Frank. Nor was he like Anthony, as I was to find out later.

Anthony rarely came over to our house. Our bunch of friends would melt away if Anthony ever came over to the empty lot to play with us. Anthony at thirteen was easily one of the most aggressive thirteen year olds in our locality. He was known to play mean. He *had* to be in control of whatever was going on, even if it was just a game. He took play seriously. Anthony thought that he should be the boss every time. None of us children liked to play with him.

The creature I called Candle Face had tried to take a good look at me and had successfully managed to read my thoughts some nights ago. Or had she?

I would keep glancing at the hole in the ground next door whenever we were outdoors at the back, but had not noticed anything during the daytime. I kept thinking back to that long blonde hair stuck in the rough tree bark. And the mark of nails or talons on the bark. Those scratch marks on the tree were still there to see for anyone who looked in that direction. The others may have thought of them as cats’ claw marks.

I had gone out to our back yard to play with Ricky one afternoon after school. I could not help being nervous. Strangely, Ricky looked unsettled too. Ricky and I had managed to play without our usual arguments and things were going smoothly. Any time now, one or more of the boys from our group of friends would join us, I hoped. If a lot of them came, I knew that Ricky would want to get up in the tree house and entertain us.

But it was Anthony who had sauntered in. Now Anthony had an attitude and just now his attitude seemed to put him in charge of the place. He looked like he owned our backyard. He looked mean. Ricky and I didn’t really want to play with him but we could not and did not want to just tell him to go home. We reckoned that anything of the sort was likely to set him off and he would want to start a fight right away.

Anthony told us that he wanted to play his kind of games. We must have looked even more unsure. Anthony first asked if we wanted to play with cars. Ricky and I had inherited mostly broken toy cars from Frank and Dennis and Anthony would likely destroy them some more. So we said “no.”

But Anthony was not going to take it just like that. He decided that he was going to persuade us to play with cars. Anthony’s eyes lit up. He dug into his pockets and came up with two of the most beautiful speedy wooden cars. Actually, one was a toy race car and the other a motorcycle carved in detail. We were persuaded. But we wanted to know more, “Anthony, where did you get these? They’re the best we’ve seen.” I thought they looked like someone had bought them sometime ago and kept them really well, unlike the toy cars Ricky and I had.

Anthony smiled a sly smile. “Let’s say that I found them. Or that someone found them some years ago and gave them to me,” he said. We started to play. We rolled our tongues to make a loud “Rrrrrr” sound and run the car and the motorcycle on the steps leading to the back porch. But after a couple of minutes it became clear that it was going to be Anthony’s turn every time. All Ricky and I would be allowed to do was to stand and watch.

We tried gentle persuasion on Anthony. We carried on asking Anthony if someone had given him the cars. Dennis and Frank had told us long ago that Anthony did not have any close family here in Austin. His grandparents, aunt and uncle had taken him in and that was why Anthony lived in the same house as his cousin Eddie. Anthony’s relatives were good souls and kind people, but having to live away from his parents could have turned Anthony into the kind of thirteen year old that he was.

Anthony would look at us from time to time. He looked happy now. “You and your other little friends seem to think that you have everything, don’t you? My Ma and Pa may not be here and they may not be as well off as yours, but I get nice things once in a while,” he told us. Ricky and I looked shamefaced. I had come to think that we had the least of anything. I had begun to feel sorry for myself, I realized. And here was Anthony with his rough ways. He had managed alright without anything but kind folk. And good toys, which may have been few and far-between.

We stopped asking Anthony about these particular toys and thought about him, instead. We felt that his situation might be a little awkward. We must have looked forlorn, because Anthony decided that it was time to give us a little story of his own. “It’s alright guys, it’s just that these cars are a special find and I can’t let everyone have a go.” It did not make matters any better for us. I was dying to get my hands on Anthony’s toys.

Anthony went on to explain that another older friend of his who had since graduated from Molly Dawson used to play with a girl who lived in the house which used to be next door to us. By now it was common knowledge about the house burning down. The girl had lent Anthony’s friend some of her toys. These had stayed with the friend when the fire broke out and the girl died. Since Anthony’s friend had not been able to return the borrowed toys he had given these two to Anthony as a keepsake. Anthony was pleased to have these cars, he said. But Anthony was going back to being the Anthony we knew and feared. He told Ricky and me that he could get anyone to part with what he wanted.

Anthony laughed, to prove his point. I looked at him when he laughed, but through the sound I had heard something else. It was unmistakable. What I had heard was a slow gurgle from the direction of the hole in the ground. My blood froze. Anthony had enough to take care of. Right now, I wanted to tell him not to brag about his toys. I wondered what I would say, but I had no words. I then heard a long drawn-out breath from the same direction.

Both Ricky and I looked stunned. Anthony could pride himself in doing what he wanted but I now knew that it was right that Ricky and I had not been tempted to play with toys which belonged to Candle Face. I was glad, because I still thought that had it not been for last night’s apparition, I would have still thought of her boringly, as a girl who once lived next door.

What if she had not liked all of us handling her toys? What if she had not liked Anthony’s claimed ownership of her toy cars? Anthony had been brash and loud, like he always was. I had got into the habit of clenching my fist and steeling myself for any eventuality before I glanced at the hole. I did this now, and to my surprise noticed that Ricky was casting furtive looks in the same direction. Both of us took a long hard look at the trophy tree as well.

Anthony had made it clear when he came in that he was not interested in whatever baby game (his words) we had been playing. Anthony was a boy with a great many ideas. He probably felt it right to air these ideas. He was now asking if we wanted to play hide and go seek. We had played this game with him before. As far as we knew and remembered, Anthony would either cheat, or bend the rules in his own favor. So we said “no” again.

Again, Anthony felt that he *had* to win us over. He insisted and we began to play hide and seek. We did not play well, and seemed to go through the motions in a desultory fashion. I told myself that I must be tired. Now that Anthony was here, our other friends may not come. I could only hope that Mom would come home early from work and call Ricky and me in for dinner.

Anthony, Ricky and I carried on with our unenthusiastically played hide and seek in the two backyards, as we always did – our house backyard and the one next door. I owned up to myself that I was distracted, but in any case, Anthony won every time. Anthony kind of enjoyed it, but grew suspicious. The last time we played, he hid in the hole in the empty lot. Neither we nor any of our other friends had ever done this before.

We could see Anthony, but pretended not to. I had gone back to giving the hole a go-by, and Ricky had always ignored it. Anthony climbed out seething. “Why didn’t you come looking for me?” He raged. “What does it matter if they couldn’t find a place for that girl in the cemetery and might have put her in there? She isn’t there now, anyway, is she?” He was louder than loud. I felt nervous and awful all over again. If she had heard my thoughts she could very well hear him shout. She could have also heard him brag about her toys. She might pop out now, to look for him. It cheered me up a bit, but right now, Ricky was having to deal with the hard realities of having Anthony visit us.

Anthony had figured out that we did not really want to play with him. As expected, Anthony got mad. He went up to Ricky and hit him in the face. “You don’t want to play? Do you want to fight?” Anthony yelled.

Ricky tried to calm him down, albeit unsuccessfully. Ricky even told him that he did not want to fight. Ricky did not want to fight because he saw no sense in it. Under the same rules Anthony should not fight either. But Anthony could not be quietened or calmed. He was keen on starting a hand-to-hand fight.

Anthony hit and pushed Ricky. Ricky stood there trying to be uninvolved. He tried to be stoic. He did not even make an attempt to block Anthony’s blows. I had never noticed this about Ricky before this, but now, looking back, the fight seemed to be going out of Ricky this point onwards.

Anthony kept on at it for what seemed to be like a long time. Ricky looked more and more resigned, but he refused to be drawn into any sort of retaliation. Anthony too, was surprised at Ricky’s refusal and carried on for as long as he could. I hoped that at some point it would dawn on him that he was hitting a neighborhood friend. Anthony finally gave in and accepted Ricky’s stance. He had just got tired of the game of hitting Ricky one-sidedly. Anthony left us to ourselves in our backyard.

Ricky went into the house and into his room. He seemed to be brooding, reasoning and thinking something through. When I finally went in, I could hear him talk in a low voice. It reminded me of his sleep talking. It was the same low rumble. I looked around and decided that Ricky was talking to himself surely? There was no one else around.

No one else but I noticed because everyone of us in the family were mostly busy with themselves. By now I knew that our elder brothers were into all sorts of substances. I knew this because of the counseling talks in school about what was good for us and what not. I had made it my business to find our about drug habits and their signs and symptoms.

Ricky would try to protect himself from Frank and Dennis. But he did not really have any idea about how to stop the bullies at home and among our friends. He had become too passive to be able to stop fights, as he had been just now with Anthony. What he did know was that he could bully me.

Raymond included me when he watched TV but had his own self-imposed image to maintain. Our mother spoke little and was lost in her own world. I did not know how to do anything about the terrors Ricky (or I) faced.

Ricky skipped dinner. He made out that he was working on something and did not come out of our room until the next morning when it was time to go to school. He avoided company and walked to school on his own, as was his habit.

**Chapter 7**

The next day Ricky and I got ready for school as usual while Dennis and Frank got ready to skip going to their high school as usual. Ricky looked awful. He had noticeable bruises on his face but maybe Mom had not noticed when she came in to wake us up for school. No one spoke a word about it. No one – not Mom, nor our older brothers, asked him how they got there, or showed any concern. I knew because I had been witness to the one-sided fight Anthony had with Ricky.

Had no one except me noticed in our family? Ricky went on ahead on his own to school. I had considered running to school on the route which cars took, but I could see Michael waiting for me. I decided that I would prefer to walk to school with Michael.

School went on without a hitch, unlike that day many days ago when I could not get Candle Face out of my head during lessons. I had told myself that I needed more mind control. That I should not always focus on what was unreal. Since that day I had tried to apply myself as best as I could. In fact, I gave little though to Ricky’s problems, or to Anthony. I knew both of us would somehow have to get out of it if Anthony came calling again. Maybe I could just run. It exasperated me to think that Ricky would probably not.

Hopefully, what had happened yesterday or even days ago would not happen again. I was thinking too soon, because there was something in the air when we got home from school. No, I told myself, I don’t want another snag but the signs were ominous. My father was already home when Ricky and I got home. He had his serious face on when he asked Ricky and me to sit down. He had something to say to us.

Ricky and I thought at first that we might be in trouble and for no fault of our own, as usual. Our minds raced ahead. If Anthony had complained, that would be unjust, in the light of what had happened to Ricky. Were Ricky’s bruises, ignored till now, going to be used against him? It could even by one of our other neighbors who used to create trouble for us when we were younger. That would be absurd; we had not done anything we should not have. I suppose both of us were getting a little worked up.

Were we in trouble, Ricky asked, but my father said “no.” Raymond let on that we should not worry on that count, but that it was about someone else and that it was important that he tell us now. What he had to say was that Anthony was on his way to school this morning when a car hit him. Anthony had died on the spot.

My father gave us a few minutes to absorb this, then went on with the details of what had happened. A Jeep had sped up the street as Anthony was riding his skateboard down the street. We knew that Anthony got to school on his skateboard, though his elders, and teachers at school had warned him that cars did not have to share the road with a boy on a skateboard. They had told him that what he was doing was dangerous.

Anthony had thought that he was invincible. The speeding Jeep hit Anthony and killed him instantly. The Jeep had not stopped and no one knew who, or what kind of person could have done this.

Later that night Ricky and I talked for a bit before we fell asleep. Our father had been as shocked as we had been about Anthony’s death but our ill-feeling towards him the previous day somehow made us feel worse. We talked about Anthony, but could mostly remember the bad bits - about how much we didn’t like Anthony and about how mean he was. We may not have managed to say anything nice about him, mainly because we did not know about anything nice. Anthony had mentioned yesterday that he may have some vulnerabilities, that he felt different to his cousins whom he lived with, and who lived with their own parents. He had tried to explain it as having parents could not afford things.

I reckoned that boys like Anthony were aware of much more than they let on. Here was something that only Ricky and I would know. Here then was Anthony’s soft side. It was something Ricky and I had been allowed to guess despite what came later when he fought with Ricky.

Ricky now brought up the fact of Anthony being schooled in the US while he lived with his cousins here in South Austin. Frank and Dennis had talked about the way that Anthony had to live, far away from his closest family. Anthony had mentioned yesterday how he had learnt to manage the little things in life. Ricky and I talked about it and I wondered what it was like for a boy growing up without his parents. It made us feel guilty and bad in a complex sort of way.

Raymond had indicated that it would be a good idea for us to go and pay our respects to Eddie, because Anthony’s parents still lived in Mexico. We had said “yes,” but had carried on feeling uncomfortable.

I had things to ask, but did not who to ask. I had seen the state Ricky had been in the day before when Anthony had attacked him. All of us in our house had seen him and kept silent about it. But I was the only one to see Ricky in the quiet of our room. He had been tormented beyond the bruises left for everyone to see. He had sought something…or someone. It was now my turn to keep quiet about Ricky’s one-sided conversation. I simply did not have the words to ask Ricky.

Our talk started to die down as we slipped in and out of sleep. We were ready for a good night’s slumber, but at least for me, that was not to be.

Both of us thought that we had heard a faint knock on our outer door that led to the front porch. Ricky’s eyes widened as wide as they could and I jumped up to a sitting position. We stared at each other for a good five minutes, wondering who it was at the door and which one of us was going to answer it.

Anthony had died unexpectedly. I had seen the messed up creature that had climbed out of the hole in the empty lot and was frightfully scared. I told Ricky that since he was closest to the other front door he should answer it. He looked out the window to see who had knocked, but said that he could see no one. Ricky stayed in bed.

After another five minutes it happened again. We heard the knocking and this time it was louder. I told Ricky again that he should be the one to answer the door. This time he found his nerve and got up to answer. He turned on the light and opened the door, but there was nobody there. We both looked at each other. We were partly still scared, and partly relieved. He closed the door, turned the lights off and lay down in bed. Ricky fell asleep right away without bothering about his sheet. I could not.

I lay in my bed, my mind racing. I was thinking about Anthony, Ricky and me when I heard the knock on the door again.

I hoped Ricky would do the needful again. “Ricky!” I whispered. But he had either fallen asleep, or else he preferred to keep quiet.

“Ricky!” I tried to say his name louder this time, but my throat seemed to have dried up. I had lost my voice. I tried to sit up but found that I could not move. The front door to our room off the front porch was slowly opening. I stared as it swung open all the way. At first I could only sense the extra warmth on a warm spring night. And then I saw it for the second time in my life.

I could have died. It was the thing I had christened Candle Face, the horrific child that I had seen climb out of the hole next door. It was bad enough to have to see her across our yard late at night. I knew it was her because I had seen her not this close, but across the fence between our lots. Nothing could be worse than for her to have made it here, inside our house and into our bedroom. I was going to be proved wrong on this matter, but that was still in the future.

I tried to shout, but with the same result. I could get no sound out of my throat. She knew what she was doing and she knew how I felt. She approached my bed and knelt in front of me.

If it was an apparition, I still did not want to have to see it. I tried to close my eyes but couldn’t. There was not a thing I could will myself to do. I was not in control of myself. I had been dazed before but now I was, somehow, paralyzed with fear.

The light from the window shone from behind her. It highlighted a silhouette. I could not see her face and that was just as well for now. I was thankful for small mercies. I had been aware, since that porch door had opened, of a smell. It was the kind of smell that comes from rotting, burning flesh. I knew, because Mom had once tried to cook some fish, then realized that the fish had been stored for too long.

Closer to me, the stench was a lot stronger. Her face was still a blur, the light shining behind her bouncing off her long dead dreadlocks. Every time I dared to look in her direction, all that I could make out was a blurred face which looked like it was made up of dripping candle wax. I told myself again that if I was forced to see her in silhouette, it was for the better.

I shuddered at the thought of a child with hardly any eyes, nose, lips or ears. I tried to still my mind when I realized that the silhouetted shape was trying to show or tell me something. She had drawn in air and what I heard now was that choking gurgle. I hated it. I wished I could do something to avoid hearing it. She seemed to be able to read my thoughts again, so I had been right about that as well.

She reached for one of my Hot Wheels cars and one of my G.I. Joe figures from the floor and put them on my bed. I was puzzled. I did not want to play with soldiers and cars now. In any case, I would not want to play with something like her. Again, I was experiencing a mixture of repulsion and compassion towards her. I had not meant to be rude, if play was what she had in mind. I just wanted her to go.

But what was this? She placed the car in her right hand and rolled it towards the G.I. Joe figure. Candle Face made a sound of a car screeching as she controlled the speed as it braked, “Rrrrrrrrrrrrrr” followed by the sound of a crash as the Hot Wheels hit the G.I. Joe. She laughed her hoarse, gurgly laugh. Her message finally dawned on me. She had heard us – Anthony, Ricky and me, as we played with Anthony’s toys which used to be hers. She must have heard us, and Anthony in particular, the day before.

She knew those cars were hers. She had recognized her toys and she had heard Anthony bragging. I remembered Anthony’s laugh and Candle Face’s response from her place of rest. Anthony had made more than one mistake. He, like me, had compounded it by jumping on her resting place out at the back.

Candle Face had enacted Anthony’s death with my toys on my bed. She had taken care of Anthony. Was I going to die? This, it seemed, was what Candle Face wanted to talk about. I would have liked to turn over and wish her away. But she chose this time to lean over to my ear. I was going to hear her talk for the very first time. I was not ready for that voice, nor for the message, “watch yourself, you could be next.” Her breath burnt my ear. Her voice sounded like she was a two pack a day chain smoker. I wanted to shut my eyes and keep them tightly closed but could not.

Okay, Candle Face knew what had happened to Anthony. But it was not likely that anyone had sat her down and told her about Anthony, in the way that our father had spoken to us.

I could watch my back, but I would never know when she would chose to strike next. Was there more to what Candle Face was trying to tell me? Or was I again getting tied up in knots of my own making? I could only watch my back by thinking ahead. Did Candle Face know that Ricky and I had not liked Anthony? Even if she did, she had to have known about that tiny chink in his personality that we had been allowed to see, she should have known that we would not wish such a death on Anthony.

Or would Ricky…? Ricky had refused to retaliate, and had received bruises on his face for that. Horrible thoughts began to flood my consciousness.

Who had Ricky been talking to, that night? Candle Face might be able to read his thoughts as she had mine. Ricky *must* have had some ill-feeling towards Anthony for what he had done. Was Candle Face responsible for Anthony’s death, and how had she brought it about if she was?

How had she translated it into a racing Jeep and who *had* been behind the wheel of that jeep? She had just worked it out on my bed with my Hot Wheels car and G.I. Joe.

From her presence here tonight and what she had shown me, I was left to deduce that Candle Face had been involved in Anthony’s death. From what she had spoken to me about, I knew that she was using this to threaten me.

Ricky shifted slightly in his sleep. I knew he would not wake up. I was annoyed. How could Ricky sleep through while Candle Face did this to me? Was he simply staying out of a more-than-sticky situation because I had never been able to back him up? Or because I always kept quiet when he punched or hit me?

I had major problems I would love to get away from just now. I had made a mistake, but was paying more than my fair share for it. If anyone had asked me, all I wanted was to walk away from Candle Face just now. Or, I would have liked her to go away, in whatever fashion she chose. The other thing I would like was for me and everyone in my family, Ricky included, to be able to look at each other and talk.

I tried to shout, but with the same resulMy mother was shouting. It was time to get up. Ricky was already up and ready to go to school. I was not going to make the same mistake as the time when I had been naïve enough to ask him for a hint as to whether he knew about Candle Face. I quickly jumped up to get ready. But as I scrambled to get out of bed, two melted blobs fell out on to the floor. One was once a Hot Wheels car and the other the G.I. Joe.

I felt sick at this sight of my once-favorite toys. But in my busy family, it was only I who was affected, I thought.

**Chapter 8**

Ricky usually walked to school alone, hands in pockets and head down, thinking deeply about his world. I on the other hand, either ran on my own, took a ride with Eric’s parents, or walked to school with Michael. Regardless of how we got to school, the only thing in common was that anyone who did not take the long road would walk through a short cut. It involved crossing a small creek using a small footbridge and following a walking path till we came out through the woods on to a regular street. School was some five minutes away from here. We simply thought about our picturesque short cut as ‘the creek.’ I am told that no one uses that path any more. I believe weeds and bushes have reclaimed it, but when I look at Google Earth, I can trace a hint of that path we used to take.

The path by the side of the creek was about a hundred meters long, but the creek itself was known to be rather dangerous. All the same, it was a short cut to school, one we could not do without most of the time. After we had crossed the footbridge, the approach bordering the creek was narrow and high. This was the worst bit for anyone who missed their step on the narrow path wide enough for just one person.

It meant that they would likely plummet down. The creek had a steep bank on its left side here. If anyone fell, they would slide down this bank and into the knee deep water of the creek. There was also no guarantee that whoever it was would fall feet first. I had gone down one day when I had just joined kindergarten. I had fallen on my backside and cried noisily. Ricky had to walk me back home and get me into dry clothes. We ultimately both got to school late and received pink slips. Mom had been very angry. We had been grounded for a week without TV.

Even Robert had fallen once. He had landed on his right shoulder and dislocated it. Robert had to wear an awesome harness for a couple of weeks. We greatly admired his get-up, but were doubly careful about that approach to the creek after that.

The approach path and its dangers did not last too long. It got better and safer after another ten meters of walking. Now it was wider and on level with the water. I often stopped to taste the water at this point. It was clean and clear and cool. Michael’s mother had cautioned him against drinking water from the creek, though. She thought it could be polluted and unfit for drinking. This safe walking zone carried on for another 60 meters. The short bit still after this wound through a wooded area and up a hill. We had to turn left on to a tarred road before it eventually led to a dead-end.

One day Michael and I headed off to school together as usual. Candle Face’s warning about watching myself had been ringing in my ear over the last few days ever since that dreadful night. But as the days passed, I grew more confident. She would not do anything….would she? The answer was, I did not know. No one deserved what had happened to Anthony, least of all Anthony himself. If only my doubts about Ricky had not lingered, if only I knew what Candle Face herself wanted. If only I could be free of my own fears.

Meanwhile, I had decided to stop running on my own to school. It would be better if I had company. I went back to walking with Michael every day, making sure that Ricky was not too far away. Today Ricky walked alone as normal. However, we all got to the creek at the same time and noticed another group of children our age from a nearby neighborhood. They had also just reached the creek. This was a rare occasion.

The obvious leader of this group was a large boy name Carlos. The other boys encircled him in the manner of bodyguards. Carlos saw Ricky and whispered something to his buddies. These other boys snickered. I was worried because Carlos was a troublemaker and a bully. I knew that he would probably get up to something.

It was not too late to back out of this route. We had only just reached the approach. I had to get my gut feeling and deep reservation about Carlos across to Ricky. The creek would be even more dangerous if Carlos were to start a confrontation. I decided not to be bothered about being called a scaredy cat. I began in a rush, “Ricky, we should go the long way to school. I think they are going to start some trouble.”

But as with Anthony, Ricky wanted to yield to the doom that awaited him. “Jesus will protect us.” Ricky replied.

I was upset with myself for not having run as soon as I saw Carlos and his gang. Had I done that, Michael and Ricky would have been sure to follow. I had just been too preoccupied with that approach path and the dangers that lurked along it. Now the danger posed by Carlos was even greater.

I was also annoyed with Ricky for what I could now see was close to a suicidal attempt. When I lost my brother some months later, I was to recall that this was the term I had thought of on the day that Carlos had fought Ricky.

Right now, I had no option but to hang around and hope that the worst would not happen. Michael understood my concerns as the two of us walked slightly behind Ricky. We carried on like this through the safe part of the creek. As we approached the last bit, Carlos made his move. He began to tease Ricky about a girl in school called Maria. Maria was in the same grade as Ricky and Ricky really liked her. He had however been a bit of an ass, in the way he made his feelings known to her. Maria was a nice girl who was not ready to go out with Ricky. She had been sensible. Ultimately Maria had politely but firmly rejected Ricky.

Carlos brought all this up. He dramatized Ricky’s part in the one-sided romance and made Ricky out to be a love-crossed idiot. He also acted Maria’s part along the path and made her out to be a giddy teenager. It was the kind of drama that Ricky excelled in, without the silly girl parts. Michael and I knew that Ricky could have done this a million times better without being half as obnoxious as Carlos. I made a mental note of suggesting it to Ricky. But right now, Ricky had to save himself. Ricky on the other hand seemed to be beyond all cares. It seemed that none of all this mattered to him. He looked steadily at Carlos.

All the other children with Carlos had laughed throughout the mini-drama. Michael and I could do nothing except stand there and scowl. I knew my brother was being humiliated. But now things got worse.

Carlos suddenly turned and pushed Ricky. Ricky flew a couple of feet backwards and fell heavily where the path was steep. Ricky sprang up but waited too long on his feet. He was a sitting duck. Carlos pushed him again and Ricky fell again. I could also see from the start that Ricky did not want to get into a fight.

My mind flew back to the afternoon when I had seen Ricky in the same situation, when he had refused to fight with Anthony. I could see that Anthony’s one-sided fight earlier, and his death the very next day had unnerved Ricky. Ricky would never be able to retaliate now.

Now Carlos pushed him again. Ricky tried to keep his balance but the impact of the blow had been more than he had imagined. Ricky fell heavily. Carlos had found Ricky’s attempt at holding his ground immensely funny and was laughing shrilly. It seemed like a charade or a slow dance to me – Carlos would hit and push. Ricky would topple over, get up and dust himself down. He was refusing to acknowledge Carlos’ strength. By now Carlos had sensed that an easy victory was within his reach. He punched Ricky right hard on his lower lip. Ricky fell. The punch from Carlos had cut Ricky badly and blood began to flow from the cut. This time, Ricky could not get up.

Ricky stayed on the ground. Carlos and the boys ran off, still shouting taunts. I went up to him, wanting to help him up but Ricky would not get up. Nor did he respond when I told him that I could help him, that we could somehow still get to school. I pleaded with Ricky a couple of times. I reminded him that Michael was with us. The three of us could manage to carry on to school, but Ricky needed to get up. I tried to encourage him, saying that he had managed to withstand Carlos’ fists some half a dozen times but had got up each time.

My brother carried on lying motionless on the ground, not saying a word, staring straight above him. I told myself that he was at least conscious, but what could he be looking at?

I twisted my neck around so that I could look straight up, at whatever image was fixed in Ricky’s eye. I could see the sky, or rather not see it. It was blotted out by formations of low lying heavy grey cloud, though it was not raining. Why were my insides knotting with fear for the three of us? The cloud formations were joining and merging, then spreading out again and changing at great speed.

I thought I could see a semi-human face in the largest cloud. It had gaps for sly eyes, nostrils and a laughing, mocking mouth. The wisps streaming away behind it resembled long, flying hair. It stayed that way for five whole minutes. I realized that it was another version of Candle Face’s face.

Was Candle Face still managing to watch us? And was she laughing at our circumstances? Her hoarse smokers’ voice and those words still rang in my head, “watch yourself, you could be next.” I wanted to shout back at that leering cloud shape above me, “you said it was me, Candle Face, but it turned out to by my brother Ricky who got hurt today.”

Michael and Ricky were with me. Not a word emerged from my lips. The clouds above shifted and now there was no face laughing at us from above.

I was frozen with fear, as when Candle Face had visited me on the night Anthony died. But now I began to feel angry. If that hole was Candle Face’s resting place, why was she plaguing us in this way? She had grown more powerful since Anthony’s death. She had somehow wanted to show herself outside, during the day. And she had managed it. She could scare me. But I wanted to reassure Ricky and tell him that this particular cloud formation had no use for him. How would I know whether I was getting through to him, when he refused to give me the response I was asking for?

Michael and I stayed with Ricky for over twenty minutes trying to get across to him that there was no one around any more to hurt him. We kept pleading with Ricky to get up. He did not.

There was a jolt of lightning and an ear-splitting crackle of thunder now. I would have preferred my bed at home to having to spread ourselves over the path by the creek. I had heard about lightning striking trees and living beings, of charring them to near-nothingness in a few seconds. There were slender trees all around. Could Candle Face wish death on me from above?

Large, warm drops of rain started to pelt us now. I knew I could not wait for Ricky any longer. The threat to me – maybe to us, had been assembled in the sky but was now falling away. Those clouds had portrayed a being I did not want to know about. The message had been directed to me, but ultimately it had directly affected Ricky. The clouds were constantly shifting and disintegrating. I was going to ignore any more messages in the clouds.

There was also the matter of being late for school. Michael and I shouted a last-minute reassurance to Ricky and ran as fast as we could to school. I hoped Ricky would follow us in a few minutes. But he did not and I did not see him at school at all that day.

The next time I saw Ricky was at home, at the dinner table that night. He and I did not speak a word about what had happened. I knew that Ricky had looked hard at that face in the clouds.

Mom must have noticed Ricky’s face and the fresh cut. She seemed detached, as on most days. She did not ask Ricky or me about how Ricky could have got those fresh bruises and that gash on his face. Nor did Raymond. Nor did anyone else.

**Chapter 10**

Ricky and I were alone most Saturday mornings because our parents would both leave for work at their engraving studios. Raymond and Shelia worked for different establishments, but did similar work. Our brothers would spend Saturdays up the street as on any other day at their favorite haunts - their girlfriends’ and friends’ houses. They had also told us that their music group to rival the best of ‘60s music was coming along nicely, in Eddie’s garage.

This Saturday morning Ricky and I were watching TV when Dennis and Frank came in. I noticed they each had a loaf of bread in a plastic bag and a can of spray paint. With Frank and Dennis that could only mean one thing – a day when they would get high on paint. That meant trouble for us.

I knew, because I had seen them before with such strange equipment. They were accessories of pleasure and amusement for Dennis and Frank. In fact, it had become common for them to do what they called ‘sniffing paint.’ They would take the bread out and empty the contents of the entire paint can into the polythene. They made sure the cans of paint were really empty by holding the spray nozzle down till there was no more. Next, they needed a place to hide.

Our house was ideal because it had a high foundation that allowed easy access under the house. The three foot gap was a lot more than the foot or so in the other homes they frequented and where they would not have got permission for their hobby. The height was perfect for my brothers. They could easily crawl under the house and stay there unnoticed till they were done. This involved sniffing the entire contents of the can of paint.

When they came into the house this particular Saturday they did not bother to hide their strange equipments and they knew that they needed no permission. The coast was clear. They were sure that they could safely do what they wanted. Mom and Raymond were not expected home all day.

They laughed as they talked about all this and went into the kitchen to get the bread out and use the bread wrapper for what they considered more useful an activity. They went out of the kitchen door to their place under in the gap in the foundation under the house. Dennis and Frank’s bedroom was a converted garage attached to the back porch. Their best spot for sniffing paint was just a few feet into the entrance of this, but under the floor boards. This Saturday, they were there in the three foot gap for up to two hours. It was a long enough time for me to practically forget about what was going on under the floor.

Ricky was uneasy. Over two hours? He felt that it had to be more than sniffing paint. He seemed to worry about who else might join them, and what more trouble might result.

But as with most of Ricky’s worries, there was no point in worrying. Dennis and Frank did as they pleased. They might have slept, or else may have passed out in their hiding place. They came back to the house through the same back kitchen door when they came to, the telltale signs of their habit clinging to them.

Both Dennis and Frank had black spray paint covering their mouths and noses. These were the parts of their faces they had clamped inside the plastic bag while they sniffed paint. To me they looked like alien beings on a high or clowns in the circus that had come to Austin a year ago, but we daren’t tell them this. They took themselves and their pastimes seriously. Right now, they themselves might have not been aware of, nor did they care about what they looked like to us.

They did not care either about what they were saying to each other. They looked at us in the living room with evil smiles spreading across their faces. Frank said to Dennis, “She said I could take on the short one, and that I should leave the wavy blonde haired baby for her.”

What we did know from past experience, was what to expect when they were on a paint high. Frank and Dennis were stumbling into the living room. Beatings on us, their younger brothers, invariably followed right after their sessions of paint sniffing. We stood up, ready to run. In a crazy Dennis-and-Frank way, this made them feel even better. We had also heard Frank’s exchange with Dennis; it could only mean that somehow, things would be worse for us. Frank made a bee-line for Ricky. Frank was bigger and taller and Ricky found it impossible to escape. He fell to the floor and automatically curled up in the fetal position, expecting the worst.

Ricky and I knew that this was going to be a lot worse than the fights with Anthony, and then Carlos. Ricky had chosen not to fight back both times. Now, he could not hit back, even if he had the slightest wish to do so. Nor were Dennis and Frank going to limit themselves to blows on the face, or a punch in the stomach, as Anthony and Carlos had done. It was going to be one sided beating again, but it was going to be a lot worse.

The hitting began. At first Frank kept on at Ricky’s legs, then his arms. Frank seemed to revel in the squeals of pain coming from Ricky. I had to be wary of my other brother, in the meanwhile. I could see Dennis coming towards me. I sat down on the couch and stuck out my feet to kick him if he came too close. Dennis was not as much of a bully and rough as Frank and kept his distance. Eventually, I thought that Frank had run out of steam when Ricky’s beatings stopped.

Dennis and Frank were laughing wildly when they finally went off to their bedroom. I hated them for relishing what they had done to us in the past…I hated Frank now for what he had just done to Ricky. I told myself that Dennis was not as bad. I did not know what to do to help Ricky. From what I had seen and heard, Ricky could have done with medical attention.

Ricky managed to crawl to the couch and sat down. His legs were covered in fresh bruises. He obviously had no words for what he had just endured. We turned the TV back on and sat there like puppets, behaving as though nothing had happened. There was nothing else Ricky and I could do and Ricky, I could see, was still in a state of shock.

What we still did not know was that the next round from Dennis and Frank was going to be still worse. Their high-pitched laughter when they went off to their bedroom was only partly at the thought of a job well done. In reflection, some of their laughter was on account of what they were going to do next. Something that Ricky and I did not have the slightest notion about.

But when Dennis and Frank came back to the living room half an hour later looking self-satisfied, my instincts told me that if we had not been able to run earlier we should run now.

Frank had something behind his back. Ricky and I knew something was up. We realized, too late, that Frank was still high and that he would still try to draw pleasure out of inflicting pain on a brother less able to defend himself. We were properly scared this time and tried to think ahead to how much worse it could get. What other tortures could he be planning to try on us?

Frank faced Ricky and whipped out his secret weapon. It was a paper airplane. Ricky and I looked at each other. Was that all? Was that what had to be kept behind his back till the last minute? We were relieved that it was just a bit of paper. Perhaps his paint high had fuddled him. Frank could not even have tried to attack a baby mouse with that paper airplane!

But Frank was getting busy with his new weapon. He drew his arm back, pointed the paper airplane at Ricky and threw it. We knew that Frank aimed with deadly accuracy. But this was easy, we thought. Ricky could avoid a paper airplane with a pointy nose. Ricky knew what to do. He pulled his feet off the floor and put his head between his legs. He was still sitting on the couch in front of the TV. Ricky was not being asked to fight back. He just had to block this seemingly harmless paper airplane from zeroing in on him. But it made its mark on the outside of Ricky’s thigh.

I was puzzled when Ricky screamed in pain. Dennis and Frank also let out a long-drawn scream. Their screams were screams of delight. Ricky knew what had just happened and so did Dennis and Frank. I was the only one who could not figure it out.

Frank lunged forward to retrieve the paper airplane. Ricky shrank back with his knees drawn up. Why did Frank have to pluck it out, I wondered. I could see a steady flow of blood trickling down Ricky’s leg from the spot where it had made its mark. Frank jumped up and down like someone whose experiment had been successful. To confirm this he carried on screaming. What I heard him shout was. “It worked!”

Ricky and I glanced again at the paper airplane which appeared to be stuck to Ricky’s flesh a few seconds ago. Ricky’s pain was evident and his blood was now running into the couch that he was sitting on. This time we must have taken a better look. Blood showed at the tip of the airplane in a long thin line. It was Ricky’s blood. The airplane had been devised with a sewing needle poking through the pointy tip. We could see the needle clearly now.

Frank whooped as he turned the weapon on my face. I blocked it with my hand but it still drew blood from the spot on the back of my hand where it had hit. If it had found its mark on my face….would I have matched Candle Face in looks, somewhat? I supposed not. Her face would always be worse.

Ricky did not want another missile hit. He ran to our bedroom and tried to slam the door behind him. Dennis easily stopped that, called Frank and both of them forced it wide open by using their combined strength. They were fighting two older boys against one – my brother Ricky. Ricky was trying to get away desperately. He turned and ran towards his bed but Frank threw the deadly paper airplane at Ricky’s butt. The needle stuck to Ricky’s skin (and flesh) but the paper bit fell to the floor. Ricky was now begging them to stop. Ricky’s panic added to Frank’s fervor and he carried on for another ten minutes in the same fashion. Dennis watched.

I wondered whether I was as bad as my two older brothers because I had not defended Ricky. I joined Ricky in begging Frank to stop. But Dennis and Frank could easily afford to ignore the pleas from this eleven year old.

I thought about fighting back, but what if they turned on me? Shelia and Raymond were miles away. There was no one to help me. But I felt awful because I had not helped Ricky. I told myself that I was as bad as Dennis and Frank.

By now the paper airplane was soggy with Ricky’s blood. The needle could no longer be put back, so Frank devised a newer torture. He now began to stick Ricky with just the needle. Ricky managed to drag himself off the bed and even managed to run for the door. Again, Dennis blocked the way and effectively stopped Ricky’s escape.

Ricky was more than desperate. He knew that it was not his life that was at stake. It was his being. He probably wanted to be a thirteen year old like any other, without having to contend with sadistic elder brothers. And then, there was the pain, a threshold he had been forced to cross to the other side. What could Ricky do except get back behind the bed and try to use the bed to shield himself?

What worked effortlessly when Ricky created magic for us had disappeared now. Ricky the performer was gone. He could have done with his bag of tricks if he had any. All that Ricky could sense was panic. All that Ricky could think about was how to save himself. Ricky had made a quick jump to get behind the bed but this had wedged him between to wall and the headboard, facing the wall and exposing his butt to his tormentor.

As Ricky helplessly squirmed to free himself, Frank relentlessly poked Ricky with demonic intensity. By now Frank had overstepped all limits and scared Dennis as well. Dennis joined Ricky and me as we asked Frank to stop but Frank seemed to be devoid of all feeling, intent on torture for its own sake.

Ricky too had come to a state when he was beyond screaming from the pain. He also knew that showing how much he hurt would have no effect on Frank. His screams died down. Dennis pulled Frank away and they left.

I pulled the bed a little away from the wall so that Ricky could free himself. But instead of doing that and emerging from captivity, he crawled deeper under the bed. He was in the same fetal position on the side he had started in. Now he hugged his knees and began to rock with his head moving up and down on the floor.

This sight scared me as well. Was there going to be no let up in what I was forced to watch? I wanted to talk about the conversation Frank and Dennis had been engaged in, when they entered after two hours of lying under our house. Had a girl given him the go-ahead to take Ricky on? But Ricky was silent, as he had been the time Carlos beat him up at the creek. He stayed there under his bed for the rest of the day.

Deep in my mind I had the answers to my own questions. But it was just a suspicion. I needed proof. Right now, Ricky was the only person who I could have talked to, but Ricky was going through situations which were not helping him. Our older brothers Dennis and Frank had just damaged him horribly. Ricky and I could only hope and pray for some kind of cure to this situation. We could only hope that those who were intent on such damage would let up.

Ricky had come to the realization that he could not stop himself being someone’s target, that he could not free himself from pain.

When my parents got home, they remained unaware of what had happened because they had got so used to Ricky staying in the bedroom. I could not have described to them what Ricky had to go through on account of Shelia’s older sons even if I had tried.

**Chapter 11**

It seemed to me that sleep for most people including my family (I am still not sure about Ricky), was a break away from the stresses of life. They could rest and dream their peaceable dreams. All of us needed this to be able to recharge, to be able to face the next day.

But as for me, I was deathly scared about going to sleep. I could not put up with Candle Face’s visitations well after midnight. Under these circumstances I had nearly come to accept that for me, falling asleep was one sure way to wake up to torture.

I could not go to sleep because I daren’t go to sleep. l did not want to sleep. It had dawned on me that we weren’t like other families, my brothers weren’t like other people’s brothers, that Ricky and I may not be able to find a way out of the mess we had to accept as our lot. Sleep was for others; I had not slept properly at night for more than two hours for the last couple of days. And that too, was because I had been too exhausted to be bothered by my private terror.

I had given in to small stresses earlier. There was one elaborate habit I had adopted with the idea that making myself comfortable could help. I made sure that I slept with a sheet on, even in the middle of the Texan summer. I also made sure that this sheet was tightly wrapped around and tucked in at the sides. I would be practically airtight when I started. I would have to make sure that it covered me from the bottom of my toes to my neck. You could say that I looked like a mummy to whoever was looking my way as I slept, or tried to. I had seen a ‘fake’ mummy on a travelling show (that mummy, of course, had a hideous face with its lips drawn back from its teeth).

My best arrangements could however get undone. I never did stay this way the whole night. By the time I woke up the next morning, I would usually be lying on my left side and find that sheet by that time was covering me loosely. Ricky was different. He woke up the same way he fell asleep. Was this a progression that I had still not attained?

If I did sleep, it would take at least two hours of struggling after I had got into bed before I could fall asleep. It did not help trying to keep the sheet and myself in position during these two hours I spent trying to fall asleep.

In the old days, before the advent of Candle Face, I could wake up in the middle of the night, quietly scope out my bedroom and then go back to wrapping myself tightly and go back to sleep.

Sometimes I would be so overwrought nowadays that I would not sleep at all till daybreak. When that happened I would not be able to go to school the next day. I could not have explained to Mom or anyone else that I had not slept a wink at night. She would want to know why, and that would have only made matters worse.

The only way I could cover up was to pretend to get up to get ready for school and then, as soon as Mom left for work at the Sears mall, I would get back into bed. Ricky of course threatened to tell, but something stopped him and he never did. I was sure that I could not go to school in the state I was in on those mornings, whether my parents got to know or not.

My daytime sleep was good for me; there were no visitations from Candle Face in the morning and there was no one at home to disturb me. Raymond and then Shelia normally left before we left for school and before Dennis and Frank left for their day away from home. My staying away from school was perhaps better for my teachers as well.

I carried on in this manner, not being able to manage my nights and managing my daylight hours as best as I could. But I slowly came to understand that it was just making Candle Face more frustrated; more angry. I came to the conclusion that I had to be miserable for Candle Face to be satisfied. I drew a parallel with Ricky’s beatings. It was the same as Frank when he imposed pain on Ricky. I thought about the strange ways of the world, ghosts and all. There was no getting away from it, though I did try.

I no longer craved sleep. If I dropped off, which, as I have explained not before two hours had passed, I would wake up in the middle of the night at least two nights a week with a sense that a hateful presence wanted something of me. My eyelids would fly open, and there would be Candle Face kneeling on the side of my bed, staring. Ours was considered to be a safe part of the city. My parents were not unduly worried about locking doors and windows, something that Candle Face had learnt to take full advantage of.

At first sight I would only see the crouching figure by my bed in silhouette. As before, she would be outlined by the street light outside the window closest to my bed filtering through. I would never be able to make out the geography of her face in this light, but I could sense that she did not have many facial features anyway.

Had she been trying to read my dreams? Her face would be just inches from my face. I was feeling more and more vulnerable. Candle Face’s ability to invade my personal and private space was increasing by the day (mostly night). I felt that I was no longer safe, whether at home in my room or outdoors, as on the day that Ricky had got beaten up by Carlos.

As soon as I would become aware of her I would be petrified with fear. I could never make a sound and I could not move the slightest. It was way beyond all that I could deal with. With her face just inches away from my face, I could smell the heat of burnt flesh radiating from her skin. I could feel her flame filled breath strike mine.

Candle Face now devised newer ways to retaliate when she sensed any resistance from me. She would sometimes poke my eyes with her index finger or close my nose and mouth to stop my breath. She seemed to do this for fun, to see what happened. I knew what would follow when I stopped breathing. My eyes rolled backwards. It would work her up and provide her with more thrills and excite her even more. This I could tell could tell from her increased movement, heavier breathing and noisy gurgling.

At the last minute she would let my nose and mouth go. But I was not going to be let off that easily. Candle Face wanted to have the last word. There was one more gesture, an Uhhhhh” sound. She would pat my hair before she left. I had to be teased. I had to be mocked.

Needless to say, I did not want to open my eyes to that crouching figure. I did not need that burnt-flesh stench. I wished someone could protect me from that breath-stopping exercise which was fun for her. I did not want to wonder if this was it, whether I would ever be woken up by Mom in the morning again. I did not want her bony fingers and long nails touching my face and my hair. Everything about her make my stomach churn. I no longer thought of the times when I was half sorry for Candle Face, when I had tried to think of her as a girl who once lived next door.

Was she after my life? Not just now. She could have contrived to kill me soon after Anthony’s death, at the time she had warned me. It may have been the fact that I had not helped myself to her possessions as Anthony had. What she now wanted was her kind of teasing, her kind of fun.

Ricky would move occasionally during Candle Face’s torture marathon. I would notice and so would Candle Face. She would quietly glance back towards him, turn her face back towards me, lift her index finger towards where her mouth might have been, and respond with an exaggerated “shhhh.” It would be the only time that she seemed to comply with my silent wish. Because, she would now get up and leave.

Ricky was carrying on with his own life, his own sleeping habits, but this was not for me. He was talking and thrashing around in his sleep as he always did. I was just not being able to go to sleep the way I used to. Come to think of it, I was no longer living my life the way I used to.

I was beginning to tell myself that since the first night when I had disturbed her peace, Candle Face had singled me out. I did not know about Ricky….would never know whether Ricky knew. My brother slept his own nightmare-filled sleep just about five feet away. His sleep was obviously disturbed, but he never awoke.

When Candle Face left, she left through the window. Her movements had not changed since that night when I had observed her climbing out of the hole next door. She would crawl to the window of my room, appear to cling on to the window sill with all the strength in her fingers, hands and arms, then pull herself upright. Next she had to reach up. She appeared to claw at the window mesh while she looked for something to hold, to open the window. Eventually, she would find a handle and ultimately she would haul her body through and appear to slither away.

Any and all of this exercise was flesh-crawlingly horrific. The only reason I kept my sight glued on her was to make sure that she was leaving.

Where would she go? The thought once occurred to me just as she left and I could feel sleep descend. Maybe I did not know and did not care, I told myself. What did it matter to me that her home during the day had to be that accursed hole? However, on most such nights I would not be able to go back to sleep at all.

Worse still, it was not only Candle Face who kept me up. Ricky’s habit of talking, twisting and turning through what were obviously more and more frequent nightmares, was steadily getting worse. I told myself that despite his restless nights, Ricky at least was getting some sleep without having to face Candle Face.

The long nights gave me more and more time to think strange thoughts. At some point I could no longer say that I did not care about where Candle Face came from and where she went. I went back to sorting out and reasoning with myself the way I used to. If I could solve the riddle of what Candle Face wanted, I might be able to save myself.

 It slowly dawned on me that I did not know how she came in either. I knew, of course, that it could be the same window, or another one, or an unlocked front or back door. Could I not lock these? If the others knew that I was going around the house locking up for the night, there would be questions and more teasing. I might just be able to quietly lock up and not tell any of the others.

The other question was: where did Candle Face go on the nights when she was not looking for me, the nights when I would spend the night half asleep, waiting, sweaty and nervous? What about the nights when I could get no sleep, because I did not want to fall asleep, did not want to feel vulnerable enough for Candle Face to disturb? Was there anyone else she was terrifying – and more interestingly, was there anyone else she could be conferring with? By now I had my suspicions about Dennis and Frank. They would do anything for a lark.

I became obsessed with these thoughts now. So one night, after I had stayed tucked into my bed sheet but had not been able to fall asleep for more than two hours, I crept up back to the kitchen and its high window. If anyone asked, I had decided to say that I had come here for a glass of water. As on that first night when I had seen Candle Face, I stood on tiptoe to look through the kitchen window.

It was like stepping back into time…but only up to a point. As on that long-ago night, it seemed to be windy outside. The trees and shrubs were rustling and waving around. Were they wishing themselves elsewhere? I looked carefully around. Eric’s dog began to whine. Dogs in the far distance barked. I steeled myself and forced my gaze towards the hole in the ground in the empty lot next door.

No, my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me this time. I knew what that was, the thing that was climbing out of the hole. It seemed to crawl and slither. It seemed very tired, its movements slow. It had its back to me, as it had on that fateful night. Candle Face flopped down on the even ground when she was out of its hole and seemed to wait awhile.

This time, she did not look in my direction though the dogs were still barking. She had grown used to them, but they had obviously not accepted her presence. She seemed to pause and think awhile. Then, she did something I had not expected. Candle Face crawled her crablike crawl but took off away from me, around the far side of her lot, down to Ben Howell Drive.

It gave me some new insight. She had not bothered to look in my direction. She had not bothered to read my thoughts. She did not think that I could want answers to those questions that crowded my mind at night. But what was this? I could see a distant crablike flurry crawling down the kerb back towards our house. It passed the corner of my house. There was my parents’ bedroom wall on the other side and my brothers’ bedroom and the living room beyond that.

I could not see Candle Face emerge on the kerb when I went back to my bedroom to look out through her favorite departure window. She had either stopped by the front of our house or else cut across the road to the other side.

I waited awhile. Some fifteen minutes later she emerged and took the same route back. She came to the great tree in the empty lot next door. She must have had some practice, because she now climbed up and went into the tree house. I shivered. The hair on my arms was standing on end. I thought it was better if I went back to bed.

I knew that Candle Face must have stopped by our house. What could she have wanted and what did she do there? The more I found out, more questions arose to myself…to anybody. Candle Face did not go that far from her home in the ground.

I was conscious of my own extreme tiredness. I slowly went back to bed. This particular night, sleep came easily. Candle Face had others to visit, and her own playing to do in the tree house.

As before, I wondered the next morning whether I had dreamt the whole thing or if it was real. On the nights that Candle Face did choose to come to crouch beside my bed, my brother would wake up and say, “Mom burnt breakfast again this morning.” Ricky was looking directly at me. Deep inside I knew what that smell was. But there was no way he could know what I knew. *He* was not a mind reader. Or so I reasoned to myself.

**Chapter 12**

Dennis and Frank were beginning to look more and more odd. We did not know if they ever went to school any more because they had graduated to high school a long time ago. They did not have to walk along our route to get to school. So there was no way of knowing where they went. Most of the time, even by their own admission, they went to their friends’ homes. Their friends, however, would go to school. So the mystery about what Dennis and Frank were doing remained. It became more obvious that they were hardly at home. Earlier, they would be at home for dinner, but now this too was becoming infrequent.

None of this about the two not being around the house bothered me because I did not want them around anyway. I think I can speak for Ricky when I say that Ricky was downright scared of them as this earlier Saturday had proven. This other Saturday would be worse in a different way because they had Ricky’s active participation. Even our parents did not seem to mind when Dennis and Frank were not at home.

Ricky and I could presume what kind of young men Dennis and Frank were going to turn out to be. The term for it was ‘out of control.’ Frank was not only fighting mean, he would storm out of the house if Mom gave him any chores at home. He got Dennis to follow him and he used words I had not heard before, not even from the mean kids in school. Mom could not ground him any more. He just broke the rules and went out if she tried.

The bathtub was used mostly by the rest of us, not by Dennis and Frank. Even if they refused to wash, how on earth they managed to get their longish hair skin and clothes in that mess, I could not figure out. After all, they mostly spent time at their friends’ homes on Ben Howell Drive. How could sniffing silly stuff like paint and getting themselves worked up do this to their looks, I asked myself. Their lack of hygiene was apparent to us younger boys.

I was beginning to notice more and more around the house. I realized that it was not just Ricky and me who stayed out of their way. Mom, too, was asking less of them. She was there and quiet as always, but talking less to us and a lot less to Dennis and Frank. I had a suspicion that she was aware of Ricky’s inability to protect himself and his failed fights. They had to be obvious because of the marks the fights left behind. So were Dennis and Frank’s looks and appetite. Mom’s response seemed to be the same. She ignored them as she had Ricky.

I continued being favored ….by Raymond. I still sat with him through his (and now my) favorite stuff on TV. He still talked to me about matters that interested him. Ricky still stayed out of everyone’s way and in our room. But Mom was drifting further away.

If anybody had asked, I don’t know if I could have told them what I knew. Dennis and Frank were getting themselves used to alcohol and other strange stuff – drugs, which our counselor at school had warned us about. I had told myself that my brothers would be my favorite unrole models, and that when I was a teen I would definitely stay away. I told myself that their drugs and dope were what were making Dennis and Frank into walking horrors. Mom did look at them keenly. She may have thought as I did, but she did not get much of a chance because they were hardly ever there.

Wherever Dennis and Frank were, they now spoke openly and often about wanting to drink beer and smoke marijuana. I had figured that they were doing this as much as they could. I wanted to know if Ricky thought as I did, but did not know how to bring up the topic. I also knew that most of the time, they were doing their bad deeds up the street at their friends’ house.

What Ricky and I knew, was that on some weekends when our parents were at work, Dennis and Frank would smoke marijuana in our backyard and play drinking games in the house.

One particular Saturday, Dennis and Frank brought two cases of beer, marijuana, and chewing tobacco to the house. The amount and variety were a lot worse than what they had indulged in before. They were planning a day of drinking games and talked and laughed loudly about it. Their eyes slid sideways towards us.

I reckoned that I would be asked to roll those marijuana cigarettes. Dennis and Frank claimed that they were fussy about how these were done and would holler for me to come and do it. It may have been apparent that I did not want to. It was also apparent to me that I would just have to. It was an order.

I had also mentioned this to the school counselor. He had looked grim, then rung Mom to try and ask her to come over for a chat. Shelia must have forgotten about it as she did about our school stuff. I know that Candle Face stank, but that marijuana …it had a different stink. Dennis and Frank had to have liked it a lot if they were so keen on it.

Two cases of beer! That kind of money could have fetched us a lot of toys. Plus, I knew what I wanted. I stirred and felt uneasy. But I wanted the carved wooden speedy toy cars like the ones Anthony had shown us. The ones he said had come from the girl who had died in the house fire. My older brothers talked a lot about their music and their rock band. But as far as I knew, that had not firmed up as yet. They were not wage earners. How on earth were they so easy with money?

In the meanwhile, on this memorable Saturday, Ricky and I could clearly remember that earlier Saturday as we shifted uncomfortably on the couch. Surely they had had enough of tormenting Ricky to last them for another couple of months?

Ricky was probably thinking along similar lines. Ricky had been caught up in not being able to save himself in a number of ways and with a number of people, my brothers included. But Ricky was not stupid. He was probably considering the best way to save himself from today’s difficult situation. In the past, Ricky had got caught because he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He was not going to let that affect him this time. Ricky had thought up a good plan. The only problem was in carrying it out. Ricky asked Dennis and Frank if he could play the drinking game with them. They may have been surprised, but were mostly thrilled to have a third person play. I was horrified. I could see what Ricky was getting at. Ricky was joining them.

Dennis now turned around to me! He asked if I wanted to play but I had no interest in drinking. Or of building up a gang of brothers with such interests in mind. I was still pretty shocked about Ricky joining in and just sat around to try and understand them while I carried on watching TV.

 My three brothers sat around the dining room table. They started with a game called 21. I did not know these games, and I was sure that Ricky did not know either. He had possibly thought that he would figure out the games as he went along. This had its problems. He either had not been able to work out the rules, or else he was getting fuddled too quickly. Dennis and Frank, however, did not mind because they were discovering the hilarious side to Ricky.

At first, Ricky had to drink an extra half a can of beer because he had brought up a number out of turn. Then, he got it totally wrong and had to drink more. I found it boring and was worrying for Ricky. Dennis, Frank and Ricky had no such concerns on their own account, and went on to other drinking games for over an hour.

I perked up when Dennis suggested a game called ‘beer pong.’ Did he have to live the part, I wondered, and was this what was responsible for that unmistakable cloud of smell around him? But it turned out to be something to do with tiny half glasses of beer, with ping pong added. Dennis and Frank’s main target continued to be Ricky. The ball would literally land in his glass and he would have to drink it up. Ricky, I knew, was not used to drinks and I could see that he was getting very drunk. I was glad when they decided to take a break from the game. But when Ricky got up from the table his legs gave way and he fell straight down.

Dennis and Frank thought of Ricky’s tumble as the funniest thing that had happened around here for a long time. They howled at Ricky’s inability to prevent himself getting drunk. They found it funny that Ricky could not stand his drinks. Ricky may have been disconcerted temporarily, but took to joining them wholeheartedly. He decided that his fall was extremely funny and laughed at himself.

Dennis suggested that they carry on to drugs. He wanted all of them to go out to the back yard and get busy with the marijuana I had been made to roll.

All three of them smoked pot in the garage out in the backyard, in which we used to store things. I stayed on the back porch. When they emerged from the shed, I could see that Ricky was not just drunk, he was stoned as well. Where was this going to end?

That was not going to be too soon or at least not as soon as I would have liked it to, because Frank now offered Ricky some chewing tobacco and Ricky played into his hands by showing that he was more than willing to try some for the first time. Frank showed Ricky how and Ricky did his best to follow, despite the state that he was in. Ricky put a larger-than-necessary wad of the chewing tobacco into his mouth. Dennis, Frank and I held our breath. Within a few seconds Ricky seemed to hold his breath as well. Then he spewed it out. He threw up all over the entire dining room floor.

My brothers laughed and laughed. It was deafening. Ricky fell to the floor and passed out in his own vomit. My brothers carried on laughing. But they knew that Raymond and Shelia would be home sometime and they had to get things back to normal as far as possible. Dennis and Frank picked Ricky up, dumped him in the bathtub and turned the tap on. They told me that they hoped that he would get a little clean. Dennis and Frank were also looking still worse for wear. I now had some clues as to how they got dirty. I had heard about people drown when they were too drunk or too stoned or both. So I stayed in the bathroom making sure that did not happen to Ricky.

I asked Dennis and Frank for help to get Ricky to bed. Dennis and I hauled Ricky out of the bathtub. Dennis held him under the armpits and I held him by both his ankles. We got Ricky to his bed and Ricky groaned when he hit it. So I knew that he was going to be alright.

I also asked Dennis and Frank to help me clean up the house. They ignored me. So I thought of giving it a miss but eventually helped clean it up because there was no one else. I had tried as best as I could. I started by trying to mop up the floor where Ricky had thrown up, but kept gagging on account of the smell. Eventually, Ricky came to, crawled out of bed and helped me clean the dining room floor. He, of course, went back to bed and to sleep.

I suppose Dennis and Frank did some tidying up. They gathered up the empty beer cans and went off to their friend’s house. By the time Mom came home she knew that something was wrong. She looked resigned, but did not know about the mayhem that had taken place in our house. Ricky stayed in our room and did not come to the table for dinner. Dennis and Frank did not come home or return for dinner either. They had stayed on at their friends’ house. I watched *All in the Family* with Raymond and the three of we had a quiet dinner before we turned in for the night.

When I went to bed that night, I could not go to sleep as usual. So I thought about the day. Ricky had surprised me at first when he showed how willing he was to join Dennis and Frank in their drinking and drug taking. Later, I had understood what it was that Ricky had tried to achieve.

Ricky wanted Dennis and Frank to approve of him. He wanted them on his side. He did not always want to be like the good guys and had finally proved, he thought, that he could be just like his brothers. They had played along with him and now knew that Ricky would do as asked.

I knew that Ricky would not retaliate, even when someone was being unjust. He had come to a turning point today, though. He had shown that he would eventually get tired (or bored) with doing what was right and might even join those who were wrong. What Ricky had managed to achieve was to play into my brothers’ hands.

**Chapter 13**

Dennis and Frank came back on Monday. Ricky and I saw them when we got back from school. We had in fact, noticed them as soon as we arrived home. They told us that they had been waiting for us. Dennis and Frank looked like they had been busy in the bathroom and looked cleaned up. They looked at Ricky with a new interest. I knew that Ricky was wondering how quickly he could get away – how quickly could he go to our room and manage to keep them out?

Dennis and Frank of course had pre-empted this. We walked straight in through the front door and into our living room where they were waiting for us. They said that they had a new story to tell us and a new game to play. We knew how nasty matters could get with them, and smelt trouble. We were trying to figure out how much trouble their presence meant.

Dennis and Frank had pre-empted this as well. They were actually trying to soothe our fears. Frank said, “come on guys…you have to grow up. You can have some thrills with us” Dennis said with a wink at Ricky, “right Ricky?” Ricky avoided his look.

We knew that there was no getting away. Frank, who always took the lead, started, “Remember that Bloody Mary game I had told the two of you about?” I was dumbstruck. How did he know that I had given it much thought recently? But Frank was carrying on, “I first learnt about Bloody Mary in English history. She managed to become the Queen of England only because her father, the King, died. But Bloody Mary was an evil woman. She had many people burnt at the stake and loved to kill. She was cursed and roams the world. I told you how anyone can flesh her out through the bathroom mirror.”

I wondered if any of this had been going on in the bathroom today, besides their overdue baths? But Dennis now cut in, “Well, we have left all that stupid school stuff behind. We found a newer story on my girlfriend’s computer network yesterday. It is still about Bloody Mary, but this one’s background is quite different.”

Dennis began the story. Frank joined in and the two of them alternately regaled and terrified us with what they called the ‘true blue’ incidents. Here is their story:

There was a beautiful young woman by the name of Mary Worth who lived in England – say, in the 1890s. She lived in the village of Painsley, which is somewhere up north, terribly far away from London. The people who lived in Painsley had never been to London, except for one or two young women who had married well and moved to towns near London. They would come home to their mother when it was time to have their baby. They would then stay on in the village for nearly a year, before they went back to their lives and husbands near London.

Now this Mary Worth had passed her marriageable age, though she was still very beautiful. The reason for this was that she had turned away all suitors when she had been truly young. Her family despaired for her and wondered what would become of her, how would she manage her life, especially when she had grown old?

But Mary was not bothered, or so it seemed. Mary loved Painsley and the woods around Painsley. But most of all, she loved herself. Never mind the mistaken queen. Mary was uncrowned queen of Painsley and all the villages around. Near the turn of the century she knew she was the most beautiful woman for miles around. And she was determined to keep it that way.

Mary’s walks in the woods had brought her across a coven of witches. They had asked Mary to join them on moonlit nights, to chant and dance to a one-line song, “I killed your baby.” They promised that Mary Worth would be immortal. Mary was interested. She was half interested in immortality but her main interest was in preserving her looks. The witches were old, and showed it.

The witches got to work, because they needed one more person to join in their midnight dancing. They told Mary that her beauty would be well preserved if she bathed in the blood of young children. They would help her to do this if she could bring them the children.

Painsley was a small village, so there were not a great many children. Mary wanted the few that were there, to promote her nefarious activities and her beauty. Mary had been supplying the only sweetshop in the village with sweets and fudge which she had cooked at home. Now, she used these for free to lure innocent children. Mary would offer a sweet to a child, get talking and take the unsuspecting victim for a walk in the woods. There, the evil witches would be waiting. They would pounce on the child and hold it captive.

Later at night they would skin the child alive. They would collect the blood that flowed and Mary would bathe in it under the moon and surrounded by silent, watchful trees. The witches tried it themselves, and Mary could see that they were beginning to look younger. Mary was thrilled and grateful for having Painsley to herself.

But the people of Painsley grieved for their lost children. Their children had been disappearing one by one. They could not stop any child over five years from walking away, with what seemed like a young woman, and never being seen again. Mary, of course, had overdone her greed. She had long ago overstepped her limits.

Mary was close to the two little babies whose mothers had come to Painsley for their birth. One rainy afternoon, she lifted a six month old from her cot late in the evening when she thought she was alone. Mary knew that the witches would be waiting for her under a rock ledge balanced on two tall rocks in the woods. Mary hid the child under her shawl and ran as fast as she could in that direction.

The baby’s mother had just entered the room to see Mary’s skirt swish out of her door, and heard the pitiful cries of her six month old trailing away in the direction of the woods. She quickly gathered her fellow villagers. They took whatever homemade weapons they could find and went off in the direction of the noise. And there was a huge noise. The witches were cackling and chanting “we will kill this baby.” They were getting ready for their weird dancing and bathing-in-blood ritual.

The villagers got to the clearing in the woods just in time. They rescued the baby and killed the evil witches and evil but beautiful Mary Worth. When she died, her well-preserved face disintegrated before their eyes into a mutilated face. The villagers ran back with the baby to Painsley. They did not bother to bury Mary of the mutilated face or the ugly witches. They were not bothered by evil goings-on after this, except when they lit their candle in front of their small mirrors (it was before the advent of electricity). They cursed Mary Worth for all that they were worth. But one man found by accident that when he stood in front of his mirror at night, with a lit candle and cursed Mary Worth saying “Bloody Mary,” three times, what slowly appeared in the mirror was the same ghostly face he had left Mary Worth with in the woods.

Ever since, said Dennis and Frank, this tale of horror had been proved right. In fact, my brothers had been to a sleepover party just this Sunday where they had experimented with the game. It had worked. Dennis said that they could see bloody nail marks on his thigh after they had tried it in his girlfriend’s bathroom mirror at night. That was why he had had a bath when he came home – to wash off the blood.

They now suggested that we try it out too. They told Ricky and me that it would be fun to prove that it was true. It was only Bloody Mary who had died, they reminded us, not the person on our side of the mirror. I knew this, but I could not very well tell them that I had already tried it. I had not died, but it had led to the release of something or someone who may not have been buried as other people were. That she had last visited me just a few nights ago. That I knew where she came from, and where she went at most nights.

There was, as usual, no stopping Dennis and Frank when they had got hold of an idea. They said that this time, they would show us how to do it. So Ricky and I, Dennis and Frank put our school bags down in the bedroom and crowded into the bathroom. Our bathroom was small, messed up and noisy by now. There were all four of us in it. I stood near the entrance, hoping to be able to run. It seemed like a long time ago, when Raymond was outside this door and I inside, trying my hand at Bloody Mary. How I wished he could be here now. He would have made sure that I stayed out, as he had then.

Frank lit a small candle he had with him and propped it up on bottom of the mirror frame. Dennis rushed to switch off the light. He was not going to bother with counting his steps as I had then. He was just going to bluster his way through. But now my older brothers decided that there *were* too many of us in the bathroom. That we could do without them. The pushed me in to the front of the mirror and ran out, slamming shut the bathroom door and laughing on the other side. Ricky and me were held captive.

I looked at Ricky. I knew what I was feeling. I asked Ricky if we still had to go through with it, since we could always fool Frank and Dennis and come up with a story of what we might have done. But Ricky’s eyes were gleaming in the candle light and in the bathroom mirror. He looked determined, as I have seen him look before. Our brothers, too, must have realized by now that we were up to something. They urged us to start, then threatened us with dire consequences, worse than what Bloody Mary could do, if we backed out of playing the game as it should be played.

Ricky was not going to waste any time. I was right in front of the mirror. He was just behind me. He spoke loudly and quickly, “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary.” I saw Ricky’s reflection go down, in the same way that he fell when someone hit him. But there was no-one but the two of us here in this small bathroom.

And then, in the candlelight, I saw a face materialize on the mirror. It was not the face of Bloody Mary. It was Candle Face, with gaps where her eyes, nose and mouth should have been. There were pinpoints of light in the centre of those eye sockets which reminded me of the gleam in Ricky’s eyes. I was looking at the face I had not seen clearly before. She still looked like parts of her face were melting and merging, too damaged to become stable even for a minute. It was clearer than the face I had seen in the clouds this morning. I thought that something was trying to stifle me in that tiny bathroom.

When I awoke, it was morning and I was in my bed. Ricky was lying in bed with his eyes on the ceiling. It looked like he had just woken up, and would soon get out of bed to get ready for school. What did Ricky see this time right above his face, I wondered. But Ricky was now getting out of bed. As he walked towards the closet to get the first choice of better clothes, I saw something down the outside of his thigh.

It looked like fresh claw marks over the nearly healed trail of the needle that Frank had plunged into Ricky days ago.

**Chapter 14**

Our parents worked hard and conducted their day-to-day life between their places of work and home. They ran the household of six with just about enough money, which meant that we and they did without the extras. Spending on outings and entertainment was a no-no. Our parents rarely went out and gave us the impression that they did not need nights out. If they did go out, my brothers Dennis and Frank saw it as an opportunity to go out as well.

Ricky of course kept me entertained with the others in our group of boys. We were privileged to be able to sit on the grass and watch his shows. Our older brothers, on the other hand, had their own ideas about rest and recreation (R&R). They drank alcohol, smoked strange stuff and were trying to put together a rock band which would wow everyone with its 1960s type music.

On days or evenings when I was the only one at home, I felt that I was lucky. I had my privacy and my independence for quality time on my own. I could watch TV or do whatever I wanted when I was not being crowded by the rest of the family.

It was one such evening. I was talking on the phone with my friend Nick. Nick lived a couple of blocks away and we did not meet in the morning on the way to school. Nick took a different route and approached the school from the west in South Austin. Nick was as keen a soccer player as I was a runner. We were trying to agree on when and where to meet for a class project. I had the house to myself and I was trying to get him to come over. Also, I needed some clues as to what the project was about. I needed to pick Nick’s brains. He and I had started out together in Kindergarten, and his grandparents had encouraged him to be a good student. Nick was top of the class and I needed to know what he knew for the project.

Nick was a worried boy, though his concerns were not about content for the project, as mine were. Nick said that there was something amiss in Ben Howell Street. He mentioned what Eric had told him. According to Eric, Eric’s dog was not well. He barked all night if he had to stay out. Eric’s dog was an old dog, but now he wanted to be a house dog. That meant that guarding the outside was not for him, as far as the dog could tell Eric. He scratched and pawed at the entrance doors and whined till he was let in.

Now Eric had a theory about this. He thought that Ben Howell Drive was no longer a safe place. He thought that burglars were afoot down my street and they had plagued his dog into wanting to stay indoors all night. Nick objected to coming over because he was worried that he would not be able to get home before it got dark. Nick’s grandparents were concerned for his safety, Nick explained apologetically.

I felt like swearing in the same fashion as Dennis and Frank. I knew what plagued Eric’s dog. He was a wise dog for preferring the inside of Eric’s house. But I still needed to get my project done. Dare I sprint across to Nick’s house now and back after we had finished our work? It would be a waste of an empty house and what about the independence I had earned?

Our phone call was going to take a little longer, I thought, when I heard a knock on the window that faced the street. I wondered why anyone would want to knock on the window instead of at the door. I had to ring off from our discussion. I guessed that Nick would do his bit of the project alright. I hoped that he would do a bit for me. I had to answer the knock on the window.

It had taken a little time, to get off the phone and to get to the window. I ran across, but by the time I got there I stopped in my tracks. Was that another knock I was hearing, on the window next to this one which faced the street? There was no one and no more knocks on the first window anyway. That could be fixed. In another two long strides. I was at the second window. But whoever it was, was not satisfied with the way I was doing my best to meet them at the window.

Within seconds, the pattern was repeated on windows further away. I heard it on all the windows around the house. The knocking had now taken on an urgency and one or more people were knocking in a frenzied way through all the house windows repeatedly. None of my friends could run that fast from window to window.

I had stopped running helter skelter. There could be only one set of pranksters for something like this. My brothers had done their best to get Ricky drunk, stoned and senseless recently. Dennis and Frank would find this funny, this knocking and hammering at speed on one window at a time, then the next and the next and so on. They had left the house earlier in the evening at the same time as Shelia and Raymond. They now probably thought that trying to confuse me would provide better entertainment tonight.

It was typical of Dennis and Frank to do something this stupid. Now, there was repeated and loud knocking at the kitchen window. None of my friends could reach high enough to knock on that one. I remembered that I had had to stand on tiptoe to look out of the kitchen window on the first day of Candle Face’s emergence.

I decided to ignore it. But the pranksters did not want to be ignored. I heard the back screen porch creak open and slam shut. I walked towards the entrance door to the porch at the back, expecting to see Dennis and Frank. That was when I noticed that the back door chain lock was in place. I reached to unlock it. I had reached out with my hand outstretched. A protective instinct must have cautioned me. Midway through, with my arm stretched in an exercise pose, the door came loose and the chain stretched taut. I stopped, then froze. A dark and dry, fibrous and skeletal skinny arm suddenly shot through towards me in the gap between the door and the door frame. I jumped back. Now I was sure about who it was.

It was Candle Face. She was the prankster – or the intruder, as I now saw her intention. As far as she was concerned, my reflexes were getting better. I could see that bony arm snake through to the other side of the door. I could see that she intended to grab my arm. I had jumped back in the nick of time. She pulled her arm back and I quickly shut the door and shot the bolt. She had been trying each of the windows all this time! I heard the back porch screen door creak open and shut. Candle Face was on her way out. I also heard a scuffing sound along the dry leaves at the side of the house facing the empty lot. Candle Face had left abruptly and was treading on those leaves.

Could I let out a sigh of relief? Not really. Candle Face had not really left. She had just crept around the side of the house. From what I remembered about her run that night when I had got up and was able to watch unnoticed, Candle Face by now was familiar with the outside of our house. Next thing I could hear was her climbing on to the foundation of the house near the kitchen window. She had come back and was scraping the window screen with her hands and raking it with her nails. It was a lesson learnt from the way she had clawed at the tree trunk some months ago. I rushed to close and lock it and managed to do this just in time. But that did not stop her because by the time I was done, she had jumped down and run for the next window.

I frantically ran there because I knew what she could get up to when she was determined to harass me. She had probably got used to easy access into our house. I knew her many means of torture and knew that I did not want her inside. Time and time again, I could see her hands scraping the wire mesh at the windows and her nails clawing to get in.

I managed to get to every window a split second after her and I managed to close and latch it before she got in. We carried on around the house in this fashion. I not only beat her every time, but I had won for the first time since my ill-thought visit to her resting hole in the ground. Candle Face stayed outside tonight. I was learning how to best deal with my problems.

I had felt elated at the start of my investigation to discover any ghost. It had resulted in the emergence of Candle Face. That was a mistake and I had occasion to regret what I done as a result. Could I feel satisfied about having won some kind of a weird game with Candle Face tonight? I could, but I could never be too sure about anything any longer. I remembered my resolve to lock up all our doors and windows before our family retired for the night. It would work, I realized. It would keep Candle Face out.

I went back to my next best pastime when the family were out. I sat down to watch TV and settled down to *All in the Family,* Raymond’s favorite programme. Archie was bullying a fellow worker. He did this very effectively. Archie had got good at rolling his eyes and looking incredulous. The man appeared to be intimidated. So far so good for Archie. But when his opponent was nearly finished, he began to have second thoughts about giving up. Archie’s opponent turned into his enemy. His enemy contrived to grow in stature and began to steal the show in terms of work-based efficiency.

Archie showed signs of exaggerated worry. I supposed he was worried about the fact that someone he had considered puny could get back at him. Archie was right to be worried. He had aired a couple of opinions, all of which turned out to be wrong. It turned out that Archie’s opponent had been right. In the end, Archie graciously made it up to him. It had a happy ending.

I sat on the living room couch and thought this story through. I wished Mom and Raymond were back now. I had spent an evening on my own feeling independent. I had acted quickly when I felt the need. As far as Candle Face was concerned, I had won some sort of a game. It was the first time that I had been able to assert myself with her. I had managed to keep her outside the house. She would not be able to horrify or harass me tonight.

I felt confident and good. I felt safe in the house for the first time in weeks. I did not have to come in the way of others’ likes and dislikes. I did not have to be frightened of anyone or anything. Not this night for any reason whatsoever. When I was grown up and had a job I would treat Raymond and Mom to weekly outings. After they had finished bringing the four of us up, they deserved such treats.

I was feeling content and floaty. Which was just as well, because Ricky told me the next day that when he came in late that night, he found me asleep on the couch with a smile on my face. Ricky woke me up and made me go sleep in my own bed in the bedroom. I slept well that night, without having to get my sheet wrapped just right. When I awoke in the morning I found that I had slept without changing into my pyjamas and without my sheet. I wondered how I had happened to be smiling when Ricky had come home.

That was because I seemed to remember a dream from last night. It involved Dennis and Frank and Candle Face and it was not nice. Dennis and Frank and Candle Face? The dream came back to me in bits. It was a lot like what I had watched in *All in the Family.* The dream seemed to be from inside Candle Face’s head!This was a change. It meant that I had got a chance to see what she was thinking.

Candle Face had spent an early evening around our house. She just wanted to come in and have some fun. She knew Ray and loved waking him up. She loved his horror stricken eyes and the delicate way in which he wrinkled his nose. She did not have a nose herself, but had taken care ever since she had come back to present her silhouette to Ray. Candle Face was sensitive about her lack of a nose. She took care not to modify the rest of her and took real pleasure in the reaction she got from children when she showed herself to them. Candle face would have liked to be in the shoes of those screaming children. That was at the root of the fun she was going to have with Ray today.

Candle Face was going to present herself at each window of the house where Ray, Dennis and Frank lived. She had some inkling of Ricky because she could burrow into his dreams. She had found Dennis and Frank when they were sniffing paint under the house and found that she could talk with them on their level (they were a foolish pair of boys). But Ray was the best.

Perhaps she could get at him earlier than usual today. That would provide more mileage for her evil ways. She could take maximum pleasure in his fear and then come back to her nest before she set out later at night. Candle Face was going to have an evening of fun. She knew that Ray would be at home, but was not sure if anyone else was in there with him. She began at her usual window, except that Ray did not know about it being the window she most used to get in. Ray had been talking to someone when she knocked, so he must have had company. She was looking forward to this.

She laughed her cackling laugh to herself at the thought of how befuddled Ray would be. It was a high pitched laugh, not her usual growl. Ray ran to the first window as expected, then to the next which she was knocking insistently on one, and then again on another. By now Candle Face was feeling slighted because Ray seemed to think that it was those foolish brothers of his. They had told Candle Face that their names were Dino and Poncho. That was a silly subterfuge, because Ray thought of them as Dennis and Frank.

Worse still, Candle Face had overdone her scare tactics with her knocking and with her gorgeously long nails. Ray carried on in a confused manner, but when he realized that it was her, he managed to lock each and every window. He had locked them one after the other, in the same pattern in which she had knocked on them. He had actually been able to avoid her arm when she managed to snake it through the gap in the porch door. She would have liked to grab him by the hand. And then she would have had a field day frightening him witless.

Candle Face reasoned that tonight had not been a good night. She had been left on the outside and had not been able to enter. She had also figured that Ray had been alone at home. It was a pity, but she was sure that she was going to get at Ray sometime soon. She would leave Ricky for now. There seemed to be too many others getting at him. Some of what that Poncho - (or was it Frank) did to Ricky, Candle Face could not do because of her lack of substantial form.

She might as well get back for that long deserved rest. Later, she would go looking for Dino and Poncho – or was it Dennis and Frank. She was sure to find them drinking that stuff out of those cans, or else smoking those strange smelly cigarettes which drowned out her own rich smell.

It had been a regular night for Candle Face. Except that she had underestimated Ray. He had made the right moves such as clicking the windows shut one by one and snatching his arm back just in time. There was more to Ray, she had to admit, than just a frightened youngster who could not get his child’s voice to work when he needed it, or his muscles coordinated enough to run when she was around.

This was my dream. Candle Face. Was it a true dream? Candle face had acknowledged that I had won, that she had not been able to enter my house. I felt scared all over again when I realized that now, since Candle Face’s entry into my world, I should not revel as I used to in an evening alone. It would be better to have my family here at home. I wondered if I would have been better off with Nick if he had come over to my house. I would not know now, but I reveled in my new-found confidence about being able to repeluse Candle Face entry. But as before, this one insight was giving rise to a host of other questions. Were Dennis and Frank throwing in their lot with Candle Face, and would they do as she told them to?

In real life, Ricky came home from wherever he was and woke me up. I had fallen asleep on the living room couch. I think I dreamt about Candle Face again but didn’t think much of it because she had not been able to come into my house. I went straight to bed.

The next morning, before heading to school, I walked to the side of the house facing the empty lot to look for evidence. All I could see were a great many small hand smudges and scratch marks on all the window screens.

She had been here all right. Had she been to see Dennis and Frank later, as my dream had revealed? Right now I had better get to school early and get hold of Nick. I had to find out how far he had got with our project. There was work to be done. Maybe, I could break out of my no homework rule and do my bit for the project. If I had been able to successfully do my best where Candle Face was concerned, I might be able to do my best for the other bogey – school work.

**Chapter 15**

Ricky liked a girl from school. Her name was Maria. Maria was Ricky’s age - they were in the same 6th grade class at Molly Dawson Elementary School. We could see that Maria was a pretty Latin-American twelve year old. She was tall, thin and willowy. She would be truly beautiful in a couple of years. Right now, Ricky could not take his eyes off her. He worked it out so that he could sit near her during class. Maria would just look back and smile. Ricky however noticed that Maria smiled at everyone. She was a good, quiet, friendly girl.

It would be an understatement to say that Ricky liked Maria. Ricky really liked her a lot.

Ricky had furthered his creative talents. In addition to his magic, stage shows, story writing and story telling, he had been writing romantic poetry. Ricky would on occasion take part in school elocution with poems that he had written. The children in school would listen enthralled. Ricky’s teachers loved the way he read poetry, anything he wrote and would appreciate his self composed poetry even more. Ricky would sometimes offer his poems to me to read at home. I thought they were brilliant.

Ricky came out of his shell to show Raymond, and our mother the notebook where he wrote his poems. Raymond said that he read little. Shelia had said she would read a couple of poems later. Up at the tree house Ricky would recite a poem or two for his friends’ group at the end of a new show. Our friends were fascinated. Robert wrote a poem of his own and asked Ricky to read it out after a particularly long (but good) story, one afternoon.

We appreciated the subject of Robert’s poem. It was about running away. Robert must have had everything he wanted and the best of toys to boot. But he felt stifled up in his grand house. Ricky, who knew about these things and particularly about his friend, said that poetry writing was a good way for Robert to get it out of his system.

I thought that Ricky’s poems were also a good way to express his feelings. Everyone could see that Ricky’s soppy romantic poems had Maria in mind. He was wise enough not to present these to Maria in class. That would have frightened her. But he wanted to make Maria see how much he liked her. He would have to go about it in the best way possible.

The problem was that Maria was not grown up enough to like Ricky in the same way that Ricky liked Maria. She wanted to get this across to Ricky without hurting him. Ricky did not know this, so he lived in hope, carrying on with everything he could to get her attention. Ricky watched carefully for any sign from Maria. If only she could let him know!

This was when he made his first mistake. Ricky had been waiting in hope, but impatiently so. He was so keen that he was now going to bring matters to the fore. One of Ricky’s ideas was to get Maria to come to a magic show where he would be the master conjuror. Ricky was confident in the way he went about these magic shows. It would it be a performance in which he would conduct magic with finesse in front of our group of friends. Ricky was also confident about the appreciation he received from all of us, the clapping and cheering. He thought that Maria would notice that the boys in our group had put Ricky on a pedestal. He thought that exposing Maria to their admiration would notch up a plus point for himself. She would know that all of us admired him and she would be proud to be associated with Ricky.

That settled, Ricky considered how to approach Maria. He would of course ask Maria in the nicest way possible, but Ricky now gave this much thought. He decided that he would send her a written invitation. He thought about this because he had to get it to stand out. A simple invitation card was out of the question. Ricky had been getting better and better in the romantic type poetry that he wrote. He knew that poetry was his specialty and that he excelled in poetry. Would this be turned into an advantage with Maria? Yes, he told himself.

It was not that he was going to present an ode or any silly piece of romantic poetry to her direct. Ricky, in one brilliant stroke, would send her an invitation composed in the poetic form. Ricky penned it carefully. He corrected it and rewrote it. It turned out to be a poetic invitation to Maria asking her to a magic show he intended to conduct at the tree house in the empty lot. It was poetry with Maria in mind.

Ricky was very proud of his creative stroke of genius, his poem. He was sure that once Maria read it, she would understand him better and that she would attend the show. Getting her to accept him would then be easy. Ricky’s invitation went something like this:

Please come with me to my magic show.

There is no trick I don’t know.

Please say ‘yes’ Maria dear

I won’t let you disappear.

He wondered how he was going to give it to Maria. Maria had a brother in the third grade, just a year junior to me. Everyone called him Chico. Chico said that was the name Maria had thought of for him when he was born. He said that it was a name for little Mexican boys. He said that he would grow into a different name when he was older. Ricky wondered if he could use Chico’s good offices to get his message across to Maria.

Ricky had to ask me for a favor to get to know Chico. This was becoming frightfully complex, I thought. In actual fact, I knew Chico well because though he was a cheeky little boy, he had been showing an interest in running with me. Which meant that when he had time Chico would come looking for me to schedule his next long run. The only drawback was that running was all that we had in common; it was mostly all that we talked about.

The next time Chico called, Ricky was not at home. I told Ricky that we had to hang around together if he wanted to meet Chico. So Ricky did, grumbling about it. I pointed out that it was for his own good, then wondered if I had said the right thing. There was a city run the following week on Saturday and I knew from the year before that the TV crew looked for young kids to film and talk to. Chico and I were both going to be there. I made sure that I had my red Budweiser cap on. Ricky was not a runner. But Ricky thought that he was running out of time. He made me promise to bring Chico by the house. It was late by the time Chico and I walked back to our house from the university. I cast a wary glance at the empty lot when I passed it, but as on most days and nights, there was no activity around the hole at the back.

Ricky was waiting for us on the front porch. He was unusually animated. He greeted us with, “Hiya folks, do you know that I just saw the two of you on the local TV news.” So far so good. I introduced Ricky and Chico. Ricky was boring holes into Chico with his eyes, but Chico just gave him an impish grin back. Ricky said, “So you’re Maria’s brother, huh?” Chico shot back with “and you’re the keen one in her grade, aren’t you?” Ricky seemed to be nonplussed for a second.

Ricky moved back his favorite topic. He had mentioned Maria, and he was direct, “Chico, can you give Maria a school note for me? It has some school homework that she won’t know about. She left early on Friday.” Impish Chico was smart and did not buy this. He wanted to tear the envelope open. Ricky said “no,” but did let on that it was confidential. Chico stood his ground. He even tried to scare Ricky by saying that Maria was out with her friends, and since Chico was going to have an early night after our city run, he could pass it on through one of their parents.

Ricky was alarmed at this turn of events. Maria’s father drove up to our house to pick up Chico at this point and Ricky hastily stuffed the invitation back in his pocket. We waved goodbye to Chico, then Ricky turned and glared at me. As if things had gone wrong because of me! Mom and Raymond were going to be home later still tonight, so I was worried that I was in line for one of Ricky’s beatings. But Ricky busied himself with making sandwiches – one for him and one for me. So I knew that it he was not going to react as he usually did with me. I knew he was not going to be the old irritable Ricky.

Ricky faced up to the setback while he made the sandwich and while he ate it in our bedroom. He would just have to get around it. Ricky felt embarrassed that I and Chico knew that he was desperate to get something across to Maria, though it was only I who knew about the invitation to a magic show in the four line poem. I had not let on to Chico what Ricky’s message was about.

It was a setback all right, but it probably made Ricky more determined. He did not want it to be known that he had tried ways and means of getting a note across to Maria through her little brother. What could he do to improve on this? It was another of those flashes of inspiration. Ricky told himself that if he was going to come out of this charade of secrecy, he was going to have to give Maria her invitation in public.

If his classmates were going to worry about being left out, he would ask them as well. There was no shortage of seats at the magic show. Our group of friends were comfortable sprawled on the grass at the back of the empty lot. I was always on hand to help with the trapdoor.

Ricky had decided that he would give Maria the invitation in full public view, but now he needed to get his nerve up to do that. He was going to practice what he had to say to Maria and he was going to practice how to say it in front of an audience. The only way to get such practice was in front of the bathroom mirror. So Ricky spent long hours in the bathroom doing this. I heard him, and asked what he was saying and who to. Ricky being Ricky, asked me to leave him alone. But I knew what he was up to. The family noticed that Ricky was in the bathroom a lot of the time. Dennis and Frank noticed, though they spending even less and less time in the house now. Raymond noticed, but Mom did not.

Dennis and Frank teased Ricky by imagining scenarios about what Ricky did in the bathroom in all the time he spent there. Raymond threatened to whack him if he did not get out that very instant at any instant. Ricky got out. I just waited.

Ricky had finally perfected the art of inviting Maria, and of handing over the poem-invitation to her. Chico had played no part, but Ricky hoped that they were friends.

Maria and Ricky were also friends and not just classmates. It made sense that Ricky invite her when everyone was around. Ricky was aware that the giving had to be done properly as well. After just one more rehearsal early in the morning before school, Ricky went to school and told his class that he had an announcement to make. Ricky gave the invitation to Maria with a flourish in front of everyone in his class.

Maria was embarrassed. She glanced at the invitation and looked back at Ricky. She held her breath for quite some time while she looked at Ricky. Ricky was thrilled. She was taking her time to think about what to say, he knew. But when Maria did finally find her voice, she told Ricky that she would not be able to go.

Their classmates told Ricky that the way in which he had presented Maria with the invitation was another type of drama of his own making. They had loved his dramatics on stage, but now they made fun of him. Ricky had always been confident of his skills while on stage but now he felt his confidence draining away. Maria and Ricky’s classmates told Ricky that he was an ass. They saw this as the perfect opportunity to tease Ricky. They also told him that there was no way she was interested in him. Ricky was devastated.

Maria had understood what Ricky was trying to get across, but was too nice and too polite to want to be rude. Today she had come as close as she could, to telling Ricky directly. Ricky was still a little confused. He was going to carry on living in hope. In the meanwhile Ricky would do everything he could to draw her attention. Ricky thought that she would respond favorably some day and that maybe he should just give it a break for now.

Ricky had still not finished with his mistakes for the day. His second mistake, though, was going to affect me directly.

I guessed what had happened about Maria not accepting Ricky’s invitation when I got home and saw the expression on his face. I did not have the heart to tease Ricky about it, so I crept into our bedroom and pretended to do some homework. Ricky came into our room noisily, then announced that he was going in for a bath. Ricky filled the bathtub and waited in the bathroom. He thought of Dennis and Frank’s long-winded rigmarole about Bloody Mary. He could remember both the stories perfectly well, the one about the Queen and the other about Mary Ward.

Ricky even got into the bath, then, like I had, the story and the mirror trick got hold of his curiosity. He felt he had to try it to find out what the near-future held for him. He jumped out of the bath, looked around for Dennis and Frank’s candle stub and found it. Ricky also found a box of matches on top of the bath cabinet which our brothers must have left behind – possibly they had had a smoke in the bathroom when no one was around. Ricky lit the candle. He had measured his walk back to the mirror the same way as I had. He switched off the bathroom light switch and walked back to the mirror to call out for Bloody Mary.

Dennis and Frank’s rules asked that this should be done our loud. Ricky spoke her name thrice, as he should, but he did it in a whisper, “Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary!” Ricky had not been standing right in front of the mirror last time, but now he was. He looked into its smudgy depths.

Ricky was also formulating words for his most fervent wish at the same time. He was thinking about Maria. Ricky at first heard what he thought was a hoarse laugh. Then a face slowly materialized in the bathroom mirror. It looked like a girl who was deathly pale. The white of her skin looked like dripping candle wax. It was not very different to the candle in front of her which was now burning low. She carried on sniggering softly. All that Ricky could feel when he saw that was horror and repugnance. He wished he had not done this trick. It was not one of his magic tricks. Ricky did not know about Candle Face. He thought that it was the face of Bloody Mary – any one of the Marys. Ricky also thought that it might be Bloody Mary trying to evoke face of Maria. He wished her away.

Ricky told me this story. He was awkward and uncomfortable while he told me. He said that the moving vision in the mirror seemed to read his thoughts. The face - if it was a face, grew and expanded. It seemed to rush at him at great speed. It was so sudden that Ricky felt that she was going to crash out of the glass. Ricky instinctively moved aside and the blob did just this. It gave a mocking gurgling laugh, then sped out, cracking the glass mirror.

Ricky was terrified by now. He opened the bathroom door and ran to our bedroom. He was panting when he told me what had happened. I knew that he was speaking the truth. Ricky had a scratch on his nose where the glass, or Candle Face’s quick exit from the mirror, might have cut him.

When Raymond came home he was annoyed because the bathroom mirror had broken and there was glass on the bathroom floor. He demanded to know why none of us had cleaned it up. Ricky knew that he did not want to get back into the bathroom for this chore and so did I. Ricky and I were quiet about it. Ricky was not sure if what he had seen was true or whether it was a momentary lapse on his part. I had felt the same in the early days, after I had just seen Candle Face, and after her first few visits. But what about the broken bathroom mirror? That was my proof.

I instinctively thought of our older brothers. I had felt earlier that they were spending less and less time in the house. I had put it down to their bad drinks and drugs habits. Candle Face, I thought, may have even managed to try and become an associate of theirs where advice about torture was concerned. But it began to dawn on me that her haunting in our house may be responsible for their wanting to stay away.

I had a huge worry now. Candle Face had not been able to enter our house at night because I had gone around making sure that the windows were latched. But tonight she had learnt the art of entering through our mirror for the first time.

Later that night I thought about latching all our outside doors and windows. But my family were bustling around tonight and in any case, I knew that Candle Face could be hiding somewhere inside the house. I closed our bedroom door and the windows and when I went to bed I wrapped myself in my sheet as I usually did, with my face exposed. When Ricky got into bed he made his usual preparations and covered himself in his sheet with even his face covered.

Ricky slept as he usually did. I stayed awake as was my custom nowadays, tossing and turning and re-wrapping myself into my sleeping position. I had stayed like this with my eyes wide open in the dark for ages, the street light from one window my only aid as I picked out all the shapes in my bedroom. As I turned towards Ricky’s bed my senses sharpened. There seemed to be a something white under his bed which was changing shape, growing and elongating even as I stared at it.

What looked like a large white bed sheet with a form hiding in it now came slithering out from under the bed. I managed to tear my sight away from it to glance at Ricky. But he was still there on top of his bed, still completely covered from top to toe and presumably asleep. I looked back at the thing on the floor which was now billowing towards me.

It crept up close. The hand I had seen at the back porch door a week or so ago emerged from one side, clutching and creasing the white sheet. It crept upwards in this fashion, clutched the top edge and pulled it down. It was Candle Face’s visage, which I had still not got used to. Her gurgle started low, then reached what I thought was a roar in the middle of this quiet night. Her hoarse voice started up, “I got your brother scared today, didn’t I?” I maintained a stunned, frightened silence. Ricky carried on sleeping.

Candle Face was carrying on, “It won’t just be the mirror next time. Like I told you, watch your back little boy. I’m not going as yet.” No, please do, was what I instinctively thought. I regretted it the next instant when I remembered that she could look inside my head. Candle Face, in the meanwhile, was tittering and settling down at the foot of my bed. She was no longer crouching beside it, as she had in the past.

I was back to being starved of my voice and was immobile, as I always had been with Candle Face around. But she thought it was a good time to start a conversation. She asked me who the girl was, whom Ricky was so bothered about? Candle Face ignored the fact that I had remained mute. She now said, “He hasn’t a hope. Tell him to give up.”

Two things happened now. Ricky stirred in his sleep and my brothers decided to come home late at night. Candle Face glanced at Ricky, then back at me with her bony finger on where her lips would have been. She said, “Shhhhhh…” in an exaggerated way. She then turned expectantly in the direction of the noise my brothers were kicking up. She upped and dropped the sheet, opened the window to the front of the house and crawled, hoisting herself up. Candle Face slithered out, as was her custom.

I was thankful to Ricky and to Dennis and Frank, if their actions were what had propelled Candle Face into action and into leaving me be. When Mom came into our room in the morning to wake us up for school, she was annoyed about one of her sheets lying on the floor. She picked it up and found it was filthy dirty. Shelia demanded to know which of us was responsible. Ricky could not have guessed and I knew but could not tell Mom. We both kept quiet but Shelia grounded us for the day after we came home from school.

Even then, I was thankful for having being allowed a little bit sleep after Candle Face had left. I could see from his face that Ricky was either still mourning his rejection from Maria, or else was still feeling the aftershock of Candle Face’s entry, or both.

**Chapter 16**

Ricky and I had regularly attended church at South Austin Baptist Church ever since we children had moved into the neighborhood. It was just the two of us who went to church from our family. My parents didn’t come to church with us, though they encouraged us to go. They prayed at home. Ricky and I realized that our parents sent us off to church so that they could have a leisurely Sunday with some hours of peace and quiet after a week of hard work.

Dennis and Frank did not come along with us because they preferred to spend most of their weekend time at their friend’s house up the street. Their girlfriends would also be there, because Dennis’ girlfriend Sara was his friend’s sister. When Raymond and Shelia were away at work on Saturday or Sunday or on both weekend days, Dennis and Frank preferred to be in our home, doing their unspeakable things. Ricky and I reckoned that it would be better to be away on Sunday. The church gave us a nice feeling and we were safe there. I thought that Sunday school was good for both of us. I could see that Ricky was becoming very devout.

I also thought that our religious teachings may have inspired Ricky to turn away from fighting Anthony and fighting Carlos. It may have stopped him from stopping our older brothers from inflicting pain. It had to be good for Ricky in the long run, according to our scriptures. We carried on looking forward to Sunday school at our local Baptist Church.

 In the spring of 1985 the Sunday school held a Bible verse competition. From start to finish, the competition was to last two months. We were not given a fixed target, but were told that we had the six days of the week between Sundays to memorize as many Bible verses as possible. Ricky had committed verses to heart on subjects as diverse as Angels and Atonement, Forgiveness and Non retaliation anyway. I knew that he would not have to sit up nights having to learn the same things.

I on the other hand, did. I had mulled it over in my head and decided that not bothering about lessons and not doing my homework for school was one thing, I wanted to learn the verses for church. It had been a mainstay for Ricky and me in the years while we were growing up and this was the least we could do. One week I chose:

72:5 He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all

generations.

76:7 You alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are

angry?

85:9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may

dwell in our land.

The verses made sense to me when I was mugging them. I even went as far as reciting them in front of our new bathroom mirror. But on the Saturday before our recitation, I could not get them right. I got the ‘endurance through generations’ wrong. If I had to endure what I was enduring at night, I hoped that my children and their children would not have to. Then, I knew what I feared. Besides her, I also feared my older brothers. How was I going to analyze these verses as they should have been analyzed?

The week’s recitation would be held the following Sunday. The student who could recite the greatest number of Bible verses correctly was going to win a sticker that found a place in their Bible. Our Sunday school teachers had given us lots of clues and references and spoken about a number of present day situations which were similar those Biblical times. Fellow students were busy looking for relevant or favorite verses to memorize. I seemed to know what was going to happen.

Ricky got the sticker in his Bible the very first week. Ricky managed to get new stickers in his Bible every Sunday after that. As for me, I got the first one right but found I was trying less and less as the weeks wore on. I knew that Ricky would do better than my best. He had found it easy to memorize most of the verses during regular Sunday school in any case. It fitted in with all his other talents Ricky had. Ricky had never missed a line in his school, church or home theatricals.

Ricky was growing in stature in the eyes of the children and the church as he made sure of his stickers. At the end of the second month, the student that won the most stickers would get to win the grand prize. The grand prize was a brand new Bible. Ricky won the Bible.

 Ricky was right proud and so was I when Ricky was given that grand prize. He brought it home and for once Raymond and Shelia, Dennis and Frank could not take their eyes off Ricky and his Bible. Shelia said that she had not known that such a competition had been on at the church all these weeks. But now that the Bible had come home, she was proud of her son.

All the kids in our group dropped in that Sunday. They could see that the Bible was Ricky’s most cherished possession. Everyone in our family did too. Our parents were proud of him and I thought that even Dennis and Frank thought better of Ricky for attending Sunday school regularly, joining the competition and winning the grand prize.

Ricky wanted to make another attempt at reaching out to Maria, to make her see how much she meant to him. I could see this from the way he looked at her in school when we walked in on Monday, when they were in the corridor outside. Maria seemed aware of Ricky’s presence, even when she was with a group of their other classmates. She must have realized that Ricky would approach her once more. She looked distressed sometimes. She knew that she had said what was right, last time. She hoped that Ricky would not embarrass her with something like that, ever again.

Being a quiet, introverted girl, Maria kept all this to herself. She did not want to talk about it and make things awkward for Ricky even when she was with her closest girl friends. So Ricky got all the signs wrong. All he was aware of was that Maria still smiled back at him from time to time.

Ricky went to school, came home and avoided our older brothers. He was working out how he could best get into Maria’s favor. He told himself that the kids in his class had been too harsh when they told him that Maria was not interested in him at all. To check out the truth, he kept asking himself what he thought of Maria. The answer came back as quickly as it had got to his brain: yes, he still liked Maria.

I had guessed all this not only from the looks Ricky gave Maria, but from his sleep talk. I had been listening in carefully and found that even the most low key mumbling could be deciphered. I remembered Candle Face’s cryptic remark when she had left the last time. She had said about Ricky, “He hasn’t a hope. Tell him to give up.” How on earth was I going to just tell Ricky that? How was I going to tell him that it came from a fearful source who might have seen ahead and got it right? It might work in cautioning him, but it would bring back the fact of the dreadful face in the mirror and the fact that it might be true. I kept quiet.

The only things which cheered me up was the fact that I had not died after Candle Face had warned me about watching my back. Then, I had managed to outwit her once, the time she had tried to jump in through our windows and had been stopped. I could only hope that Candle Face was wrong about Ricky not having a hope.

Ricky told himself that as before, he would never know about Maria’s feelings for him unless he showed her how sincere he was. He took the Bible to school one day and showed the kids at school his grand prize. I could see that they were also mighty impressed. They asked Ricky for details about the church contest. The ones who already went to church with us backed up Ricky and doubly confirmed with the others how good Ricky had been. Maria stayed on the fringe of the crowds who wanted to be Ricky’s friends.

Ricky lost his nerve, had major doubts about what he wanted to do and what he was doing. He brought the Bible back home. But as was Ricky’s custom, he pondered hard, rehearsed the giving again in front of the bathroom mirror. He told himself that Maria had realized what that prize meant to him, and therefore would mean to her.

The next day he took the Bible to school again and offered it to Maria. He told her that he had won it at Sunday school but Maria already knew by now. She said she knew how much it meant to him but Maria did not accept the gift from him. She did try to soften it for Ricky, though, by telling him that he was ‘nice.’

Once again Ricky was devastated. But this time he took the blow a lot worse than during the invitation for the magic show.

Even his fellow classmates were kinder to Ricky this time round. Like me, they thought he should not have made such a major mistake. Ricky could have asked them before he took this step. They did not tease Ricky. They knew what a great guy he was, for winning that Bible.

I knew what the outcome was by that evening again. It was not a difficult guess, going by Ricky’s mood and by the fact that the Bible was back in the house. I also noticed that Ricky was looking at the window with anguish written all over his face. His lips were moving and he seemed to want to invoke something, or someone. He was asking one huge question or many little queries of himself. He did not repeat it at the new bathroom mirror, though.

Like a flutter in the cool evening breeze, I heard a choking, gurgling titter from the direction of the back yard. This was going to be another hell of a night, I told myself. I took care to lock all the doors and windows that night.

Ricky made his bed preparations after dinner, after he had forced me to help Mom with the washing up instead of himself and after he had finished his school work. I marveled at him, for not forgetting all his responsibilities, which included bullying me. Despite his troubles of the day Ricky went to sleep as usual while I stayed up as usual.

The window to the street creaked open and the filthy rotten smell came in before she did. Here she was. She had chosen to slide a long fingernail in to unlatch it and had hopped in, one leg at a time over the windowsill, toes first on the floor. Her gash of a mouth changed shape. The message she was getting across to me was, “told you so.” She actually did a little dance around the room, not crouching nor sitting nor slithering on the floor. She went up to Ricky, pointed her index finger at the sleeping form and turned her head towards me. She cackled loudly enough for me to hear, but Ricky slept on.

Now Candle Face dashed up to me. I would have leapt out of the window if I could, but I was immobilized as always in her presence. Candle Face dashing around was more alarming that her slow creeping and crawling. She hovered over my face, exhibiting how jubilant she was. Now she had a story to tell.

Candle Face had grown tired of watching Ricky mope. She had been to see Maria. Maria was not aware that Candle Face had given her the once over, but what Candle Face had seen did not impress her. She wanted to know how Ricky could like someone so insipid, so goody-goody? I could not talk, but wondered briefly if Candle Face did not like anyone who was as awful as herself?

There was more to Candle Face’s story. She was annoyed and wanted me to coax her personal story out of her. Knowing that I could not or would not, she began to talk about her family. She had never mentioned them before, so I listened carefully despite her dreadful voice. She was upstairs, she said, and a three year old brother downstairs when the lightning struck. I knew about this. But then, she said, her parents woke up and knew that something terrible was happening. They did not know what it was. They rushed out with her brother, fearing an earthquake and to figure it all out.

They had a large lawn outside, though there were a lot of people on it, drawn there because of the fire. The crowd was happy to see them and surged forward to greet the family. They put their little boy down on the grass and were talking to the people they knew. They told them that one of their children was still in the upstairs room and had to be rescued. But no one could get back inside. The little boy wandered off and back in the house. They lost both their children that night.

I was astounded. That boy who I thought might be in Molly Dawson Elementary School had died! What a lot of versions there were, about the empty lot next door. I wanted to ask Candle Face what happened after that. Candle Face said that since her brother was an innocent. He went around looking for innocent souls like himself. This was as close to personal as Candle Face could get. She came back to the present.

She reminded me that she *had* warned me about Ricky losing out. Why could I not have communicated this to Ricky? Never mind, she carried on, maybe her brother would befriend him, maybe he would not. Candle Face did not care. Ricky deserved the worst. He deserved what he got. “Why?” Was my silent question. Candle Face turned her wrathful face towards me. “Why should everyone look at and listen to him with their backs to me?” was what she said.

What I could make of this strange utterance was that Candle Face had watched us unseen when Ricky performed up in the tree house. We would have our backs to her back lot hole. The other fact was – what about my glances in that direction? I had always checked it out before we started. I always gave it a ‘clean’ chit because I never did notice anything untoward on these occasions.

Was Candle Face jealous – first about Maria, and then about Ricky? She must have realized how absurd she was, because at this point she yanked the window open and stepped outside like a ballet dancer. Candle Face had left in a huff. It was no longer the tired old Candle Face. She was stronger now.

Ricky on the other hand did not mention Maria by name after that. He chose to sit at the back of the class and did not steal looks at her any more.

**Chapter 16**

I will say this, that Ricky’s dark and somber mood did not stay for long. His mood lifted slowly at first. It took awhile before Ricky was back to being a quiet and serious boy who spent time on his own and had a passion for drama and poetry,

I had witnessed our brothers when they had used and abused Ricky. I had seen him when he thought that giving in to their ways might help him win their favor. I had seen Anthony getting at him. Quite a few of us were aware of the Carlos incident. We knew of the occasions when Maria had politely turned away. However, after her dramatic entry through the mirror Candle Face had left Ricky alone. I remained worried for him on that account because Candle Face had voiced her opinion about him. I could see that Ricky was somehow picked upon by a great many people.

Ricky had been able to face up to each situation as it arose. I could see that he would never retaliate, no matter how anyone treated him. But he managed to collect his wits and his feelings and bounce back on his feet each time. He knew that his perspectives were clear, he knew what he was good at. Ricky maintained his grades in school and went back to taking part in school and church plays and conducting magic shows. His creative side flourished. The stories became more extempore, weirder and sympathetic towards the ghost family who had by now found their skins and original looks. Ricky was back doing what he did best.

But then came the next sudden change. This must have been long after he had won the Bible but had not been able to persuade Maria to accept it. It was sometime after I thought he had gone back to being the twelve and a half year old that I knew.

We – I and our friends noticed this next big change. We were bound to. Ricky suddenly lost interest in what he did best. Now, he did not want to hold magic shows any more. He mentioned something about how easy the tree house had become for anybody and everybody to get to, and tore down most of it.

It took more time to bring it down than it had to put it up. Ricky carried on single handedly and doggedly, a determined expression on his face. Ricky took the tree house apart on his own. The board perched on the branch was exposed to rain and sunshine. It was back to the way it was when we had started on it, before we built a trapdoor on the first storey and before we built the second storey.

As far as I knew, Ricky had reasoned the one sighting he had had of Candle Face, as his own imagination, brought on by his heightened emotional state at the time. Candle Face still came in at night, harassed and horrified me. I had spied on Candle Face one night, for a change (rather than her on every one else including Maria). My suspicions were that she may have visited Dennis and Frank, but if she had, they had stayed put in their room for the rest of the night. I had seen her return to her lot and then go up and into the tree house. I was sure that there had been no one else around while I watched.

Any mention of Candle Face today reminds me of the helplessness I felt as an eleven year old. I was never prepared for her evil presence. Did Ricky know what I was putting up with from Candle Face ? How much did Ricky know?

I did brood about Ricky’s comment about the tree house. Did he know who had been going up and in there, or was it a guess? I greatly wanted to ask him what he had meant. But as before, I did not want to bring up matters which I knew he might want to avoid.

Ricky at this stage was changing again. He was a different Ricky to the boy he was a month ago. He still went to school and did his lessons, though he followed his class work mechanically. He no longer raised his hand when the drama teachers looked for someone to write them a script or to act on stage.

Ricky came home after school and stayed in his room. This at least was usual. Ricky and I carried on going to church Sunday school, but Ricky’s participation in church became like mine. He listened if he had to, grew bored if he felt that the topic had been discussed before and did not participate in it a hundred percent, as he used to. This was not usual for Ricky.

Ricky carried on writing. He wrote and narrated his stories to us. I found that the stories had become darker, the situations in them more impossible and more fantastic. There was a mystery story about a family who disappeared. The story ended with a more than intense fire, as at a crematorium. Listening to the story made all of us in our group very uncomfortable. This had not happened before.

There was a girl and boy, a father and a mother. They were Mexican by birth. They used to live here in South Austin. The girl was a great beauty and her family worried about her, except the younger brother. He knew that his sister would be able to take care of herself.

But her mother was worried enough not to want to go to work, even when she was offered a really nice job at the ice cream parlor at the local mall. The mother was happy to stay at home, drive her daughter to school and look after her children in every possible way.

Well, someone cast an evil eye on the family. It was a powerful evil eye because all of them just got more and more sick. A kindly doctor at the local clinic found out what had taken hold of them. He said that they would have to move out and have their home exorcised. Nothing else would get rid of the evil eye.

Since real medicine was not working, the family asked the priest from their local church to come and take a look. He came, went over the house with a special exorcism tool which could tell that a spell had been cast. He confirmed their worst fears and said that he would be back the next day to do what was necessary.

But the priest died in his bed that night. The family did not know what to do. They felt awful about the priest who died. It was a confirmation of the fact that their home was cursed. Or else, they felt, the priest would not have died. The evil spirits in their house must have resented the fact that they would have to leave, and had killed him.

They wondered what they should do next. In the meanwhile, they would stay on in their house just a little bit longer. The friendly doctor received a call late at night to say that the mother and father were ill. But by the time he drove there, he could see that the house had gone up in flames and everything in it had been incarcerated. He never found any signs of the family or their house.

No one ever saw the father, mother, girl and little boy again and people wondered if they had really been burnt to death along with their house. Now Ricky added a twist to the story. The boy had a friend who had borrowed some of his toys to play with. When the family disappeared, this friend kept the toys for a few years, then gave them away to his sister.

I was amazed, at the story and at Ricky. All around me my friends stared down at the ground while they recalled which of their toys were truly theirs, and which were borrowed. I was also surprised because Ricky had given the people in the story no room to escape, unlike his earlier stories. The other parallels to real life situations I could not bear to think about. It came to me in a flash – these were people he knew!

And that ending about the toys, Ricky had taken from Anthony’s conversation with us. We had not spoken of Anthony since the night he died. But what Ricky was telling me through his story, was that he had would never forget the afternoon when Anthony came to play.

Ricky would retell the story with special additions and alterations. It was like his other stories at this time. People went into situations over which they had no control. Then, they died at the end. There was never a way out for them now, unlike in Ricky’s old stories. This was a definite change that I could not make head or tail of.

Ricky had also carried on writing poetry, but it was as though the composer had changed. His poetic style had taken a 180 degree turn. Earlier, the themes centered on love and peace. But now he changed his focus to the lack of peace, death and destruction. Also, the poems and writing these poems became all-consuming for Ricky.

One of Ricky’s main activities in his room was poetry writing. He did little else. I was the only one at home who noticed. Shelia and Raymond seemed to be longer hours at work and we hardly saw our older brothers.

The only thing that had not changed was that Ricky wanted his poems to be read. I read them, as I always had, but did not really like the tone of his newly penned poems. He sent his poems to a number of magazines and entered a great many poetry competitions. There was a magazine called Stone Soup and a contest called Paws for Poetry. There was American Children’s Poetry compendium that Ricky had wanted to be included in. There was the national Boy Scout poetry contest. Ricky won first place in this contest.

I read the poem in print. It gave away his innermost concerns and hope. It exposed Ricky’s soul at the time. It spoke of this world and its lack of peace. Here is his poem:

 There was peace on Earth,

 *At its birth.*

 *But things have changed,*

 *Everything is rearranged.*

 *Peace is gone,*

 *Everything is wrong.*

 People did it,

 *But they won’t admit it.*

 *If we help one another,*

 *And work with each other,*

 *We can change the Earth,*

 *It can be a second birth.*

Ricky was happy about winning first prize for his poem. Our family showed less interest than at the time he had won the Bible. Raymond carried on saying that he was not in the habit of reading anything, poetry or otherwise. Mom said that she was right busy just now. She was trying to complete a special engraving order. Ricky and I thought that Dennis and Frank might have been able to set it to music – their Pink Floyd type rock band was going to be launched soon. But Dennis and Frank took this information from us with glazed eyes and a marked lack of interest.

Our friends were happy enough. They had had a poetry recitation from Ricky after ages. It reminded us of the way things used to be. Maybe we, too, were outgrowing a lot of our interests. The bicycle hop and clover picnic were definitely things of the past. But when I look back now, I can see that the change in Ricky led to the rest of us changing in little and large ways. It was called growing up.

There was my friend Nick with the short blonde hair. We rarely met these days, outside of school. He was topping my grade at studies and was working hard to keep it that way. I complained, but not much, because he had helped during that project. Candle Face had interrupted that discussion by knocking on the window. Nick was ace. He wanted to be the best in everything and had less time for me or the group because he was doing his best in academics and at baseball. Nick said that his main focus now was his grandparents who were bringing him up. He was going to have some sort of a top class university job and his grandparents would live with him when they were really old.

Eric still played with Ricky and me but I could see that he invited us over to his house next door less and less. Ricky would not go in any case. I did, but felt that I was under the scrutiny of his parents, his sister and his dog. His dog was an old dog who had reacted to Candle Face that first night. The dog would now look mournfully at me as though I were to blame. I suppose I was. Well, Eric was still worried about his dog and was spending more time with his family which included the dog. I had heard them sing along with each other in the car on the way to school, but now they sang together at home as well. I could hear their melodies wafting across to our house. Shelia would hear too, and stand still for as long as the song lasted. Sometimes the dog would wail or howl while the rest of the family sang.

Michael and I still walked to school together. I supposed we would, till we graduated. And maybe travel to the next school together, since we were in the same grade and best friends. Michael and I would graduate a year later. Michael, like Eric, was paying more and more attention to his sibling. Michael wanted the best for him and his brother. He would have to give more of himself, he felt.

Robert was more Ricky’s friend. He was older and broader and shorter than Ricky. Robert always came out to play with us, we never got to go to his house. His mother looked at me and my brothers with a strange expression. It was as though she wanted to say, “Who, or what could you boys be doing here?” Now Robert was also Ricky’s age. I could see that he was preoccupied with something else going on in his head. He was trying to get away from home and Ben Howell Drive too often. Robert was a troubled soul as well.

I was changing. Earlier, there were all my older brothers to be scared of. But I could now understand Ricky better. I could see why he was the way he was. I had always got on with Raymond. I could also sense some of my mother’s frustrations. I could see how swamped she was with her engraving work and housework, with having to pretend not to worry about Dennis and Frank. I could see how helpless she, too, felt from time to time. I no longer wanted our family to play at happy families, the way I used to. We were what we were.

I was spending more time with the changed Ricky. Besides what I saw, there were more changes in how Ricky related to his world. He got himself a new good friend. But the friend was not there.

**Chapter 17**

Ricky turned from an extrovert to an introvert. It might have been going on for awhile and it could have been that I had not caught on to the little changes. But when I did, it seemed like he had changed practically overnight. It was the same quiet Ricky, but now he was a lot more quiet. He was quiet because he did not want to say what he might have said. It could have been about Maria, it could be his changed interests and it could be that our group of friends was loosening up. Maybe Ricky thought that he did not have anyone to turn to, that there was no one who would understand him. There was me of course, but I could be easily overlooked. Ricky was quickly becoming a stranger to me, and possibly to himself as well.

It was a long time since I had heard Ricky talk to himself. There had been one incident on the evening of his brush with Anthony. But now I would sometimes see Ricky sitting on the curb in front of the house talking to himself.

Then, there had been that ominous story from Candle Face. She had talked about her own life just once. Candle Face did not need anyone to feel sorry for her. But she had mentioned a baby brother who may be on the lookout for similar innocent, lost souls. And she had mentioned Ricky, though she did not care for him.

As we lay in bed one night, I plucked up the courage to ask Ricky who he had been talking to on the curb.

“Griffin”, he answered. The name sounded familiar. It was becoming popular in America. I tried, but could not connect it to anyone I knew or could have known.

“Griffin? Who’s that?” I laughed to cover my embarrassment at not knowing.

“You know, Griffin, said my brother. A Griffin is a creature that has the body of a lion and the head of an eagle. We are friends.”

“You’re crazy. There is no such thing as a Griffin.”

Ricky shrugged and paid no attention to my ridicule. He had got used to that after his brush with all the others.

I did not want anything to do with Ricky’s Griffin, but I looked it up in the school library the next day. The dictionary told me that “the griffin (griffon or gryphon) is a legendary creature. Its description was identical to the one that Ricky had given me – body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The Griffin was thought to be an especially powerful and majestic creature. Griffins are normally known for guarding treasure.” The illustration showed a griffin with its legs like an eagle's legs with talons.

Ricky had probably researched his friend better than I had. The old Ricky would have taken all this information and put it into a story to hold us spellbound. The new Ricky had simply taken him in as a magical new friend.

 I changed my mind about not having anything to do with Ricky’s Griffin. I now wished I had a Griffin. The creature sounded magical enough and majestic enough.

And then, I saw Griffin. He was not a figment of Ricky’s imagination. He was real.

It was after dinner one evening. Ricky had sponsored me to do the dishes with Shelia. Shelia knew it was Ricky’s turn. By now she had probably figured that Ricky was not doing the chores she would give him to do while she was away. So Mom and I were in the kitchen. Ricky said that he wanted some fresh air and had stepped out to the back porch. We could hear him talking to someone. I presumed it was his imaginary Griffin. I looked at Mom. She had her hands in soapy water, but had stopped scrubbing. She had her head to one side and was listening intently, the way she would listen to Eric’s family singing.

Which meant that Mom knew that something was up. Had she noticed the change in Ricky as I had? But Mom went back to the dishes. We wiped up and headed towards our bedrooms. Ricky had come back to our bedroom, got his writing notebook out and was scribbling away furiously in ours. He was totally focused on his writing. Both of us turned in after sometime. I wrapped up like a mummy like I did and stayed on my back. Ricky, surprisingly, did not cover himself. He fell asleep, I thought, because there was no movement from his bed. I stayed awake with my eyes wide open.

I kept checking our room out in the half light. It was getting late but I was restless, as I usually am, early in the night. I turned towards Ricky’s bed and froze. It was like all those other nights when I saw something I should not have. My mind worked furiously, but I could make no sense of what I was looking at.

Ricky was sitting bolt upright in bed. His legs were bent at the knees and his feet were planted firmly on the floor. But more than his legs, he was holding his arms and hand in the most unusual way. Both his arms were stretched out in front, parallel to the floor. His hands had flopped at the wrist. Ricky’s hair was tousled from lying in bed. His eyes were wide open. And then, Ricky rose slowly from his bed and shuffled forward noiselessly. He did not blink. I thought that he looked scary, and he also looked funny in a way. It reminded me of one of the characters out of a TV cartoon. He reminded me of Scooby Doo’s keeper.

I would have loved to burrow down in my bed and forget about Ricky turning into a ghoul. And then I knew. Ricky was sleep walking. I had seen that on TV, and heard that if children could sleep talk they could sleep walk as well.

Ricky’s form had carried on shuffling his feet forward. He was headed for our room door. Ricky could be in danger if he walked out. I would either have to do something, or get someone else to help. What about Raymond or Mom? Should I dash across, rouse them from bed and enlist their help? I thought not. It would take me some time to explain what was happening. They would be sure to doubt the sleep walking at first. I would have to convince them. Mom knew that something was up with Ricky. If she had kept quiet about it, she must have had very good reasons to do so. No, I decided. Trying to get Raymond and Mom involved was not a good idea.

But what about Ricky’s by now steady progression outside? He would have to manage with me, I decided. I walked out though the kitchen to the back porch a little behind Ricky. Ricky was fearless in sleep as he had always been when awake. He went up to the door to the back porch from our back lot. And then he stopped. I stole a glance at our trophy tree. It looked neglected and forlorn, with just the one board across its base of branches. My eyes, as always, slid to the hole in the back lot next to ours.

I kind of knew what to look for, now. But it was not Candle Face who emerged. It was a real life Griffin. It looked similar to its picture in the dictionary in our school library, but it was different, at the same time. It was small and furry, not much bigger than Eric’s dog. Its front pays and middle bit were like a lion cub’s. A pair of wings like eagles’ wings rose from its middle. The eagle effect was carried on to its back legs which ended in long talons.

The Griffin now trotted up to the tree, flapped its wings and took a short hopping flight through the night sky before it landed at our back porch door steps. Ricky smiled in his sleep, opened the door and stepped out. All this time I had watched the strange form, its description in the dictionary ringing in my ears. But that had made it sound majestic and somewhat fearful. Frightening, like the other form which arose from the hole in the back lot next door, I told myself. Ricky’s Griffin, I noticed, was cute and friendly – with Ricky.

And it talked. Ricky spoke to his friend in low tone. The Griffin talked to him in a human voice. It was not only Ricky’s Griffin, I now remembered where I had heard that name before. Candle Face had spoken of her brother. His name was Griffin

This was Candle Face’s brother I was looking at. Candle Face was humanoid in the worst way possible – her form, her hair, the rasping voice and her movements. Griffin, on the other hand, was like a little person in its playful manner and its ability to talk and play like boys. Ricky and Griffin were playing out in the grass now, with Griffin hopping up, flapping its wings to soar up briefly. The next instant, it dived down to nuzzle Ricky’s hair with its beak. I do not know if Ricky was awake or in a state of sleep. His eyes stayed wide open. He used his arms in play, but they stayed in front of him, hands flopping down. Ricky still adopted the stance of a sleep walker, even if he was a sleep walker at play. He must have still been asleep. I watched from the back porch, unabashedly jealous. I could do with a Griffin of my own.

What was it that Candle Face had said about her brother? I gave myself the answer. He had said that he looked for other innocent souls like himself. And so Griffin and Ricky had found each other. The two souls were happy. Ricky did not feel picked upon at any point. He was not in danger of nasty pecks or pummeling. There was no question of his friend wanting to inflict pain of any kind on him. Ricky in sleep was finally free.

Why had I not been able to see Griffin before tonight? Why had anybody not been able to see Griffin? Someone had read my thoughts, because I heard a chirrupy boyish voice, ”I keep myself hidden and invisible in the day. My sister does too.” I was happy that Ricky had not been talking to the air around him. Never mind if the others did not know that. But Candle Face on the loose and invisible? It made my flesh crawl, to think that I would not know if she were around. It also made matters more dangerous for me.

I went down and sat on the back porch steps as the night wore on. Ricky had his friend in Griffin. I hoped that Candle Face did not think that I had chosen her for a friend. Why did she bother me so? I was ready with my answer. I should not have bothered her that night many nights ago, when I had gone in search of one or more ghosts – I had been searching for the ‘truth’, as I had told myself.

I kept telling myself that my thoughts would invariably invoke Candle Face. That was how it was now. There was a loud choking gurgle from the hole in the back lot and what sounded like a barking command. Griffin turned to Ricky, said goodbye and flapped back home. He carried what looked like a golden egg in his beak when he went. Ricky turned back towards the steps where I sat. I waited for him and both of us walked back to our bedroom in comfortable companionship. We went to bed and this time, Ricky covered himself from top to toe as was his habit.

Ricky slept on. I stayed awake for just awhile thinking about what I had just seen and heard. I remembered the dull gold of the egg in Griffin’s beak as it glinted in the moonlight. That was when I remembered the other description in the dictionary. That Griffins were associated with treasure. Ricky had found his treasure. What about me, I wondered?

When I awoke the next morning, sunlight was streaming in from the window next to Ricky’s bed. It was bright golden sunlight near his feet. Ricky sat up, collected some glittery stuff from where the rays of light fell. He walked to the closet and dropped it at the back of a clothes shelf.

Mom came in later and said she was glad that we were both up, because she had to go in early today. She then glanced at Ricky’s feet and her mouth fell open. “Did you play in the grass outside last night?” was what she said. Ricky and I did not answer.

I wanted to ask Ricky about what had gone into the back shelf. As before, I felt awkward to voice the amazing sights from last night, the remains of which Ricky had stored. But this was the changed Ricky. He leant forward and said that Griffin had promised to take him to a distant land tonight. I could not go, but Ricky would let me read the story of that adventure after he had written it.

Needless to say, I could not wait, but I was back to worrying about Ricky flying to a place far away on the back of Griffin. It turned out that Ricky could not wait, either. I fell asleep early that night. Ricky and Griffin met in sleep or wakefulness, I do not know which.

Ricky’s story of his adventure with Griffin was written as soon as he returned. In life, Griffin was an infant. The long sleep of death gave him and his sister a great deal of time till a young boy came and disturbed their place of rest and invoked their spirits. Griffin’s sister had taught him to read and Griffin at thirteen and invisible, had been to the Primary School library and read most books he could find.

At first Griffin was greatly interested in dinosaurs, those beasts which roamed our earth millions and millions of years ago. Among the many types of dinosaur, there was one called Protoceratops. These beasts had beaks and laid eggs which appeared golden. Their bodies were part terrestrial beasts and partly birdlike. Griffin liked the lineage. He would like to trace his ancestry to this particular dinosaur which had lived some 70 million years ago in central Asia.

Fortunately, Griffin was able to choose his form from the mythical Griffin, evolved from Protoceratops when he revealed himself to Ricky (and later me). His sister could not.

Griffin held Ricky in his talons when they took off for the land of Griffin’s ancestor’s ancestors. Ricky reached forward and gripped his ankles. They were safe till they reached Mongolia. Griffin and Ricky could see the Protoceratops’ graves from above before they landed. Their fossil outlines were unmistakable. Ricky did a little skipping run during landing. Griffin felt he was home.

At first they walked around the outline of the huge beasts, noting their beaks with a kind of frill along the place where their necks would have been. They then set off to look for their fossilized eggs in their fossilized nests. Griffin said that it was thought that Protoceratops always lined their nests with gold. It was a soft metal and gold always appeared magically near Protoceratops herds. Their huge eggs were safe in these nests which were tough, yet soft enough for the Protoceratops mothers to rest their bellies.

Griffin’s research in our school library had revealed that when humans arrived here some 70 million years later, it was not difficult to make the connection between the huge dinosaurs which had grazed here (Protoceratops were herbivores), built their nests, laid their eggs and stayed close to gold. If a human found a Protoceratop fossil, he knew that he would find gold nearby. The connection endured. Their early drawings gave birth to mythological stories about the Griffin.

Ricky and Griffin left the same way they had come. Airborne once more, they could see in the land below a mountain which looked like it was made of molten gold. Across this mountain and the valley of the great beasts and their nests, was a hillock of red sandstone. The sun was setting. Ricky would never forget the beauty of that evening and the joy of being with Griffin who was a true friend.

Ricky came back in time to go to bed and to go to school in the next few hours. Griffin had an irate older sister waiting up for him. It was lucky for me, because Candle Face had counted the hours anxiously for his return. She had not bothered about anything else.

I begged Ricky for more detail after I had read his story about his flight. I did not know that this was to be one of the last stories that he would write.

**Chapter 18**

I remember it as being a holiday. I was doing my usual at home, which was not a lot. In fact, I was lolling in front of our TV in the living room. Some movement at the edge of my line of vision must have first alerted me. When I looked in the direction in which I had first spied it, I could see a blurred image on the other side of the glass panels of our front door.

I got up to take a better look. It was a teenager, a girl, and she was standing there looking like she was not sure about whether she should knock.

The girl must have been about sixteen or seventeen. I had never seen her before, but she seemed to be waiting expectantly, looking around. She saw me and shot me a quizzical look.

“Hello.” I said.

She did not reply. I was wondering if she had heard me. When I looked at her, I realized that she was lost in thought, studying the outside of our house with some keenness.

“Hello?” I said again, stressing the query. I opened the screen door and stepped outside. She had taken a quick peek inside in the time I had taken to open the door and walk out. I now stood on the porch with her. She turned to me and spoke for the first time.

“I used to live here!” She announced. I quickly did my sums.

“It must have been a long time ago because I’ve lived here for over six years.” I said.

“I used to live here in this house but that was when it was not here.” She said.

This did not need sums. I did not know what to make of her proclamation. My only question was, “What does that mean?”

“This house used to be many miles away to the east, on the outskirts of Austin. Someone bought our house when I was little. I was eleven and remember my parents telling me that our house being relocated by the new owners. I remember the men in overalls who came and did the relocation. It is something I won’t forget.” She paused here, and rummaged inside her handbag. She had found what she wanted. “Look, my Dad took pictures of it being plucked out and put on the huge truck that drove off with our house.”

This was a new view of our house for me. There were men in orange overalls. They seemed to be leveraging our house from its foundation onto huge steel pipes. There was another photograph of our house, as tilted as it could get, the whole of it on a huge flat board which fitted all the floors. The men seemed to be rolling the steel pipes off and a crane was hoisting the flat board foundation onto the hugest truck I had seen. None of my Hot Wheels toys had a copy of this one. Robert had the newest Hot Wheels and he did not have anything that looked like this truck either, and this was some six or seven years ago.

This was another view I would probably never see. There was another photograph of our house being driven off in that monster truck. A girl of about my age stood in the foreground waving at the house. I looked back at the girl in front of me. It looked like her when she was eleven. It was our house all right, I smiled at her and handed back the photographs. But she shook her head, saying that I could have them. She said she had another set and had brought these because she wanted to give them to whoever was there now. She looked back at me with the same quizzical expression she had when I went out to say hullo. She said, “Notice anything different?” No, I had not.

She laughed and took me outside by the elbow to our front yard. She was the same height as me, but then I was tall for my age. Everyone had told me this. The girl pointed to the roof of our single storey house. “Notice anything now?” I had to. The house in the picture had a small duplex room stuck above the bedroom I shared with Ricky. I realized now about the second entrance door from the front porch, and why people tended to think of our house as a duplex.

I wondered why our house had been remodeled and that little room knocked off. Ricky and I could have done a lot with it if it had stayed, and if we had a stair to it. It could have been a playroom for me or a writing den for Ricky. The girl was carrying on, “That must have been quite a sight, a house with its duplex and roof complete, on a truck driving down to South Austin! I was still wondering what happened to that duplex. Was it really our house that the girl had lived in?

The girl had no such doubts. “I’ve thought about our house so often since it was sold and driven away. I’m glad I found it!” The girl was close to crying. She stopped now, let go my elbow and wiped her eyes. I could give her a little time to herself. We were quiet for a bit, as she thought her thoughts and I thought mine. What I was thinking was, that this explained the mystery of the high foundation under our house. The foundation of our house must have been built separately, and our house slid off the huge truck by those men in orange overalls, to be positioned where it was now.

But I had more questions – what was here before our house arrived six years ago? Was it an empty lot as well, and did it join with the empty lot next door? I would not wait for a couple of years this time. I would ask my parents tonight. This was a mystery that needed to be solved as soon as possible. It was more intriguing than the duplex and what happened to it.

The girl was composing herself now. I wondered how I would feel if someone bought our house and either lived in it here, or took it somewhere else to live in it. I wondered how I would feel if I were to visit our house with its new people many years later, as the girl was doing.

“Your people must have had this house brought here. I lived in it before the house was moved here,” the girl was saying. I had already figured this out.

She asked me if she could come in and look around. I asked her to come in. She walked in and recognized little details inside the house right way. She pointed to my bedroom and told me that it used to be her parents’ bedroom. The room above had been a storeroom.

Our house was now a single storied house. I told her that the room off the other front door used to be my parents’ bedroom too, but now my brother and I shared it.

We walked around the house while she exclaimed at all the features she could remember. She was traveling down memory lane. I kept imagining myself many years later, trying to relive my life in this house. It was a weird feeling and a new line of thought, something that thrilled me with its new set of wondering what it would be like if….

I told her about my family who lived in it now – my brothers, my parents and me. It was fun talking to her but I was feeling a little unsure. Was I giving too much away? I asked myself later whether it was the girl or whether it was the fact that currently Candle Face dropped in whenever she felt like it. Right now, I felt instinctively that I should hold back, if only just a little bit.

My instincts were right in a way. But they were off track. After we had walked around a bit she took a step closer to me and asked, “Have you ever seen anything weird in the house?” It came unexpectedly, but because of all that I had seen and heard, I could have answered her right away.

I could have said “yes.” She had given me a cue. I could have told her about Candle Face and her visitations to this house, to what used to be her parents’ bedroom. I could have told her about my most recent discovery about Griffin. I could have described my older brothers’ torture sessions inflicted on my brother Ricky. Instead, I took a deep breath and said, “no.”

She looked at me and seemed to heave a sigh of relief. She left and I never saw her again. I have thought of her often. At the time I heard her with disbelief. That morning I wondered why she would say that, when the weird thing inside and outside the house was only because of the empty lot next door in this neighborhood, the family that got burnt in the fire, and the little girl who was put into the hole in the ground in their backyard? I wondered if the infant boy had also been buried in that hole or whether Griffin had gone in there looking for Candle Face. He was a seeker all right.

Ricky came back that afternoon looking exhilarated. He looked like he had had a busy morning. I told him about our visitor, what she had said and showed him the photographs. Ricky was ecstatic. He thought that what I had to tell and show him was material enough for one long story. I heard him talk to himself again (or was Griffin there and invisible to me?) “Wait till you hear this, Griffin. It’s going to be like another of your researched stories.”

My older brothers were at the table during dinner that night and strangely subdued. I steeled myself to ask the many questions I had. I told myself that I was older now. I had asked about the family next door many months ago and my family had found it funny. I had to hand to them the fact that they *had* answered my questions as far as they knew. Now as then, I looked at Raymond and told him about the girl who had dropped in this morning and how she had said that this used to be her house, except that it used to be some miles out of town. It was Raymond’s turn now to look subdued.

My parents exchanged glances. Mom spoke first. I was surprised. “Yes, I used to live in the projects with the four of you. You were only five or six years old, Ray, when your father and I bought this plot. We bought the house separately. It was somewhere in East Austin, if I remember right. The owners were going to tear it down and build a new house. We got it at the right price, moved it here and got the package at a price we could not otherwise have afforded. The original house even had a duplex. But we were advised against it because we were putting the house on to a different foundation. The foundation we had to build here in Ben Howell Drive would not have been strong enough for the whole house.”

All this was news to my brothers. They were quiet. They were listening, for the first time.

Our mother had explained the remodeling and the missing duplex. She had explained the foundation, which I had half guessed. But there was a lot more I wanted to know. “But Mom, but Dad, what was here before that? Was this another empty lot?” I had to know.

Mom looked over at Raymond again. She had said her bit, she seemed to indicate. It was now over to him.

Raymond was not usually at a loss for words. But now he looked at us, chewed his food slowly and cleared his throat before he spoke. “It was an empty lot all right, but it was a large empty lot. It was part of the empty lot next door. The city must have decided to split the large lot into two. They sold ours to us first. They have not been able to sell the one next door as yet,” was what he said. Raymond gave no more explanations. We ruminated over what he had said and ate in silence.

The next question had to be coming. Dennis asked first, in a voice lower than his usual loud and brash self, “You mean our lot was part of the lot next door?” Yes, they had a garden here. I believe they had started digging a pool closer to their house when the fire broke out and the family died.” This from Shelia. She did not look at us.

We had nearly got used to our parents communicating as little as they could. But we now had more questions. It was not just me who had to know. Frank asked why they had bought this plot when they knew about the fire that had killed at least one person in the family. Ricky asked why they had moved all of us here if they that at least one child had died and may have been buried in their back lot by the city council. I, of course, asked about the hole in the back lot. I was braver now than I had been some months ago.

Shelia and Raymond answered us with infinite patience. They knew only what they had been told by the realtors, they said. This was the same as what Raymond had told me many months ago – that there had been a fire and that one person had died in that fire, a girl. They had heard snippets from our neighbors after they had arrived, but each new story conflicted with the other, and there may not have been any substance in the garbled gossip that everyone had to offer. We knew this to be true. We finished dinner in silence. Ricky helped Mom for a change. I brought out the photographs again and passed them around.

Raymond and I watched TV for a bit after this. Ricky and I prepared for bed as we used to earlier. I made my mummy-like preparations and Ricky covered up. I could hear Dennis and Frank as they left for their friends’ house to stay over. They told Mom that the rock band was at a crucial stage and they needed to work on their music. Mom did not say anything. Raymond told them that he intended to have a good night’s sleep undisturbed. He told them not to play loud music. My family went their usual separate ways.

I never did go back to our house on Ben Howell drive after I finished school and joined the army. Mom told me many years later, just before my wedding that after she and Raymond separated, they sold the house and a woman some years older than me bought it. But she moved the house and told them that it was going back miles out of town, to where it had first belonged.

**Chapter 19**

I still hated going to sleep. I had won once when Candle Face had to stay outside, looking in and venting her frustration from the other side of the window. She had managed to come in and go out since that memorable evening. She had learnt many skills since then. Most of them focused on how to give others the worst time possible, and me in particular. Despite everything, and Ricky’s preoccupation with Griffin, I could see that everyone else looked forward to a good night’s sleep. The only thing I could contemplate was a nightmare-filled night. But then again, I could never be sure about these nightmares.

Ricky and I were always told when we had to go to bed. It had turned into a little family drama of its own. Mom or Raymond would point to the living room clock when it said eight o’clock. At first we would ignore the summons. Then we would refuse, or plead for more time. Then, after a lot of whining, we would finally comply. By now it would be half eight and our in-between time was up.

Ricky was always the first to get into bed. As usual he liked to sleep on his back and would be completely wrapped in a sheet, head downwards. I often thought that what I was looking at was not my brother asleep, but someone who was dead and had been covered in a white sheet.

Now he regularly talked in his sleep. He walked out as well. I had a sense of all this in my trance-like situation. Sometimes I would follow him. Griffin would join him. It made me sad to watch the two of them run, fly and play in the back yard because as before, I felt completely left out. They wanted no one else. Was Candle Face listening? I stopped going out to watch.

By the time I came in to the bedroom to go to sleep, Ricky would usually be in his ready-to-go-to sleep arrangement. This meant that I had to turn off the light before going to bed. I hated it when he put me in this situation and I hated having to turn off the light and then make my way to bed. In any case, the light switch was on his side of the bedroom. If I turned the light off, I would have to run across the room and dive onto my bed. I was scared to death of the dark. No one could blame me for all the nightmares I had and the visions I possibly saw.

This particular night, I stood there in the middle of the bedroom mapping out my path from the light switch to my bed. Our bedroom was in a particularly untidy state with our clothes, toys and books littering the floor and our beds undone all day. Shelia had told us off just that morning but we had left this chore undone. This meant that I would have to clear the clothes and toys lying on the floor of this path – the way back to bed. I had a short cut for that as well. I simply pushed them out of the way and walked up to the light switch.

I decided to practice. I checked under mine and Ricky’s beds. I was not going to forget that form in a sheet hiding under Ricky’s bed. I pretended to turn the light off, then ran towards my bed and jumped several feet before I reached it and landed onto my bed. I had taken a new interest in long jump in school and could do this perfectly. I had to start the jump several feet before my bed. I knew I had checked under my bed, but the jump gave me additional security, just in case she had materialized in the few seconds when my back was turned.

I was always afraid of Candle Face trying to grab my feet from under my bed, I have to admit. My bed was old and squeaky and the sound that I made when I crashed onto it must have echoed around the house.

In my self conscious state I felt that everyone in the house must have known what I was up to. But I knew my family. They did not care, and nor did I. I was afraid of the dark and I had reason to be. I guess I was not as brave as I would have liked to be. Was my fear making me as wily as my nocturnal visitor? I was telling myself that I would have to match her wits if I had to take serious note of her threat – to watch my back.

I practiced hard with the light switch. But not everyone thought it was necessary. “Just turn off the light!” Ricky yelled at me from under what I thought of as his shroud.

His muffled dark voice startled me. I knew I was not brave at all because by now I knew I was crying in fright. “Ricky, can you please turn off the light?” I asked, with tears rolling down my cheeks.

“No. If you need me to get up now, you need a punch. What you really need is to grow up and do it yourself.”

“You do it!” I was panicked.

“No, you do it.” Ricky said loudly.

I heard my father shout that he did not want any more shouting and that we had to go to sleep. I knew the practice had not made my brave. I knew that Ricky had gone back to the old, uncaring Ricky. I would have to do it or else try getting into bed with the light on in our room. Which meant another beating from Ricky…which might turn into another round of discipline from Raymond. There would be no end to it.

Fingers quaking, I turned off the light and ran straight towards my bed for the final jump as I had rehearsed. I leaped in the air and landed perfectly on my bed. As quickly as possible, I wrapped the sheet tightly around myself and tucked the sides tightly under my body, as was my habit.

I must have looked like Ricky, but with my face and head exposed. I lay there motionless, my senses on full alert for any signs of that evil presence. My breathing was heavy and loud. I think my heart beat was even louder.

“Go to sleep.” Ricky mumbled. So he was still awake.

Everything was dark—too dark. My eyes had still not adjusted to the darkness and they would probably not, for several more minutes. I knew sleep was out of the question, whether Ricky or Raymond dictated it. I would not go to sleep because for me, this period of time was crucial. My eyes were still wet. I told myself that I was completely vulnerable to any evils that might lurk in the darkness. I told myself that in my life, evil lurked everywhere. I could not stop feeling sorry for myself. I could not stop feeling scared.

My heart and breathing didn’t get a chance to relax before I heard a faint noise from the closet. I wished it away but should have known that nothing stays the same. In my house and that anything, once noticed, would only get worse. The noise grew more curious. There was a shuffling, then a creak. Then it dawned on me. “Oh my God! I had forgotten to check the closet,” I thought to myself.

The closet door was slowly opening with a long drawn out creak. I could only guess who was behind it. All my attempts at practice in my bedroom had come to naught – checking under my bed and Ricky’s, counting my step from the switch, my jump and target so as to land on my bed – it was all useless. I had cried in fear earlier, but now and as before, I could not alert Ricky or beg for his help because not sound came from my throat, as was usual in Candle Face’s presence. Ricky might have refused help as he had earlier, in any case.

The creak from the closet door as it opened was accompanied by the smell of burning flesh. So it was Candle Face. I carried on waiting with bated breath, my thoughts racing around, my compounded fear building up the sound of my heart beat, my eyes straining to see in the dark. My ears picked up the sound of a choking gurgling mocking sound. It had to have come from her throat. I could still not see any part of her. All I could sense was her presence.

The presence pressed down on my mattress towards the end of my bed. Scratchy, skeletal knees were pushing my feet apart, one on each side. Candle Face was making herself comfortable. I needed help and I needed it now. I got none. My sense of helplessness was total. Was she not going to be the slightest bit distracted, as she had last time? Was she not going to consider others whom she could confer with, in her evil deeds this time? Did I have to be her only target? I could not believe what was going on. This had to be way past my worst nightmare.

But that was just what she had in mind.

She had not chosen to crouch or kneel near my bed as she had in earlier days. Then, I could make out her silhouette from the street light and know which way not to turn. It was going to be a lot worse. I thought back to an observation I had made from her last visit. Candle Face was stronger. I reminded myself about Griffin. Could his interaction with Ricky have driven her towards this stage of harassment with me? Did she not understand that she and I did not have to be close in the sense that Griffin and Ricky were? They were friends together, I wanted to convey to her. She and I were not.

Maybe this thought infuriated her even more. The growl coming back from her indicated “why not?” I would soon find out. The stench was coming closer. She had climbed on, I knew, because of the depression in the mattress. Now her knees were between my feet. My eyes were now starting to make out shapes in the dark. I heard a low, evil laugh and felt her inching her knees towards my knees. I wanted to kick at that foul body. I wanted to get away but couldn’t move.

I could not stay like this. I had to do something. “Help!” I tried to yell again, but my voice stayed frozen. She began to laugh at my obvious fear. She moved some more, aware that I could not. She was closer to my face, sitting on my stomach. I felt suffocated, unable to breathe. I could not take in any more of that dreadful smell of rotten flesh cooking. She would have known this, but leaned forward, her face inches from my face. I was being forced to inhale that burning flesh stench. I could see it as well.

I could have renamed her now. Her face was not just covered with melting, burning blobs like wax. The gaps were worse. There was a blue colored flue around the burning bits. Rotten smell streamed out. I thought of holding my breath. Could inhaling water and drowning to death be worse than this? And then I saw what looked like maggots on fire deep inside the top waxy layer of her face

I wished I could stop breathing. I wished I could pass out or die or something, to get away if I could not move. But right now this was where I had to be. I had to inhale her dirty rotten smell. I had to stare at the glowing maggots which had long since eaten her flesh. Her face up close and those squirming pests…they wanted more, and they knew where to get it.

She mimicked the words I had uttered some minutes ago. Candle Face was yelling, “You do it! You do it” as she pointed to the light switch and smiled her broad, vicious open mouthed smile. The maggots inside seemed to be waiting.

Ricky moved slightly and mumbled something like, “Go to sleep, you baby.” Ricky had actually heard her! Could he not distinguish between my teary voice and her throaty mimic? How could he think it was me, when I had done what I had been forced to do. I had switched off the light and come to bed, to the horrors that could approach it so much more easily than I could. I was amazed that he could think that it was me.

Candle Face was getting down to serious business. She started to poke my chest with her bony right index finger. I heard her rasping whisper as she continued on the same theme, “You do it.” I could not have done anything because I could not move. This time I knew why I appeared to be paralyzed. I was paralyzed with fear. I could l feel her bony fingers stabbing me in the chest. She started to use both index fingers and repeat, “You do it, you do it, you do it.”

She must have gone on like this for I don’t know how long before I passed out from the pain. It seemed like hours. Passing out had its advantages. I no longer had to be terrified and in pain. I remember a feeling of falling, of getting caught inside a whorl inside a dark tunnel. The tunnel smelt different. I no longer had to stop breathing that foul smell. It was a smell of fresh cut grass and I somehow knew that I was younger….eight years old, maybe?

I fell onto soft earth. I heard a chirruping voice and the swish of a long tail. It was Griffin. He looked at me indulgently. I hoped she was not around. But Griffin moved aside, and there she was. She was standing on her long spindly legs. A light shone behind her and a breeze ruffled her dreadlocks. She was in silhouette again. Candle Face had a story to tell. I could not help being curious.

She had awoken when the smoke from her burning house had streamed in through her nostrils and into her lungs. She could hear voices calling out from a distance through the thick black smoke. Her throat, nose and lungs ached. And then there was nothing, just black space. She knew she had died but the fact was, she had also been cremated inside her room upstairs inside her house. She remembered the house and its garden. She remembered her parents and the little brother.

She would hear voices sometimes. They were voices, possibly a child younger than herself. Could her brother have been with her? As far as she knew, he was downstairs in his bed next to her parents’ bedroom. But she was sure that it was him she heard. She was tired. She missed her home and her family. She did not want to be far from them. She knew she was near when she heard voices. She found a huge grassy hole near her house, lay down in it and slept.

She would hear children’s voices when she awoke. She knew they were busy around her garden, playing and making things. She heard her brother’s voice sometimes. He was growing up fast and like her, did not want to stray too far from the house. One day she saw him. He looked like a mythological creature she had seen pictures of. She remembered his name was Griffin. He was now a Griffin. She remembered him from his voice, his eyes and his name. The grassy hole was their home, but no one could see them.

She would like a form for herself. It did not matter if no one but Griffin could see her. She realized that the way she was – no face and a burnt body, would not do. She wanted to keep her long blonde hair. She would find the person she wanted to be. But there was a great disturbance one night. Someone or a number of people were dancing on their home, jumping in their place of rest. She had found peace till now, but this was not peaceful. She vowed to get that person. It took a long time for her to rouse herself and emerge from that hole. She did not know which direction she should go in.

She heard a dog bark and whine. She looked towards this disturbance. And then she saw me, the person who had forced her out. She had no arguments with any of the things that had happened to her up till now. But when she saw me she knew what I had done; she knew what had happened to her. She told herself that I was the cause…of everything. That she was going to get me.

I was sorry and I was frantic again. No, I tried to tell her. I’m sorry I disturbed you. I was just trying to find out about your lot on our street and what happened to your house and to you. But please don’t blame me for everything else. There’s Griffin. Look at him. He has found a friend. He is happy. But the girl would not relent. You gave me a nasty name, she seemed to say. Griffin is different. He could keep himself occupied even before you saw him and before your brother found him. Griffin would walk to school, find out more than you did. I had sensed that Griffin was in my school, but how? But she was continuing. She told me that my brother Ricky found him the day she had created that cloud for me to look at.

“I have been tired for a long time. I think I am growing stronger now,” she said. She said she was not a goody like Griffin. “You disturbed me, and I am going to get you.” It was the same old threat I had sensed.

There was no way out for me. She had been telling me this all this time. I was the culprit and I was going to be her victim. I would have preferred to stay in the condition I was in – unconscious and not knowing. Candle Face (I could think of no other name) went home eventually. The sun rose to a new day. Raymond got ready for work and left. Mom got ready to wake us up. When I awoke the next morning, I was partly still terrified and partly glad that I had passed out into nothingness – the instant when I did not have to stay aware of her. I was relieved that last night’s ordeal was over.

But when I tried to get up, I could not, not right away. There was a burning sensation on my chest. I looked down and noticed the severe dark blue and green bruises in the center. But then I noticed that Ricky was looking at those bruises. His eyes lit up and he smirked. His eyes seemed to say, “That should teach you not to go where you weren’t asked.”

I jumped out and covered up before Mom came into our bedroom.

**Chapter 20**

Severe, fast and strong storms are still a common occurrence in Austin. The city is well known for its spectacular storms. These could start with one flash of lightning – the one which burned down Candle Face and Griffin’s house and them with it could have been one such. High winds are possible, as are tornados during stormy weather.

All of us in our group of friends had found out in school what to do when a severe thunderstorm watch or severe thunderstorm warning was issued. They said that the city was concerned for the safety of its children. Children could be caught out when their parents and guardians were not there when the storm, or worse, a tornado tore through Austin.

They had told us what to do when lightning filled the sky. They told us how lightning killed. I knew that it had killed, that too next door to my home. There could be floods not necessarily caused by rain, but by hail. Hail was the result of massive updraft winds, one of our teachers had said. I loved that terms, but se did not have to be weather experts to know the signs of what to watch for and what to do when the weather turned severe.

One Saturday in late spring, thunderclouds filled the sky. The sky had turned completely gray.

My parents were not at home because they worked on Saturdays. Ricky and I had several friends over. All our friends were there. Nick was there, after what seemed like a long time. Eric was there with his dog. Eric had been saying that his dog did not like thunder and might want the comfort of creeping in under one of our beds. Michael and his brother were there, and Robert was there too, though he said that he had sneaked out of his house to be with us on a Saturday. We all sat in our large front porch and watched the fast moving thunderclouds roll in. All of us were talking about the weather because these clouds seemed to fit the typical weather patterns which preceded Austin’s spectacular storms.

It wasn’t raining yet, but we knew it could, at any time. We wanted to find out if the weather was going to put on any shows for us. Ricky turned to the local TV news channel. We said that we could have told them. Ricky stopped us to say that tornado watch had been issued for South Austin.

The weatherman was advising viewers to prepare an inside room, preferably a room without windows which looked out, to evacuate to, in case of a tornado. The news gave a lot of coverage for a possible storm. Storms past and present were shown and analyzed. All of us were greatly taken up with the impending storm and could talk about nothing else. We chattered about everything that we knew of, connected to tornados. We had watched fierce storms the people on TV were putting on as a build-up. We got bored of being shown the same disasters over and over and continued back on to the front porch, in case we missed anything.

The wind picked up and at first small hail started to pound the ground. There was still no rain. We made short sorties, pretending to be dive bombers with our arms spread out and tilting up and down. We got our nerve up to run into this falling hail. Robert and Ricky stayed out of this type of play, I noticed. They were older, I remembered. Well, Ricky was not too old to play with Griffin, I thought, so why not me and why not us? The rest of us were jumping up and down. We were thrilled and excited. Rushing out into the hail and then rushing back in to the porch was great fun.

Ricky went back indoors and after awhile walked out with the Bible that he had won in the church competition. Ricky slowly walked down the porch stairs and into the driving hail storm with his prize.

“Ricky. What are you doing?” I yelled.

But Ricky paid no attention to me. He walked to the middle of the yard in the hail storm and sat down on a garden seat in the front yard. Ricky sat to one side of the seat. He was facing the road. He had left a place next to him.

This was madness. I wanted my brother inside. If we could not get to that inside room the weatherman had told us about, we could at least sit inside the porch. It was more fun than being in a windowless inside room. We could follow nature’s show from this vantage position, though I knew that this was more dangerous than that inside room. It would do for now, I thought. And I wanted my brother in here with us. By now we were all shouting at Ricky to get up and come back to the porch where the rest of us were. Ricky’s best friend Robert was with us. Robert would have to play safe. He did not want his parents to know that he had been out during a hailstorm and an impending tornado. He too, was trying to persuade Ricky.

In the middle of all this noise, we heard three short attention seeking beeps from the TV. We ran indoors where more weather news awaited us. Ricky stayed outside. He continued to be pelted by tiny hailstones.

In the house, the weatherman said that he was elevating the tornado watch to a tornado warning. He mentioned that several callers from Gillis Park neighborhood in South Austin had reported seeing a twister heading south. Gillis Park was near us, just north of Ben Howell Drive.

Michael yelled out, “Gillis Park is only a mile away. The tornado is heading this way.” Ricky must have heard him. We had just heard Michael’s warning when we heard a loud roar. The wind picked up. I could see our trophy tree through our back window. Its branches were weaving madly, its leaves flying and the board knocking, making a sound like a gunshot. The leaves in all the trees around our house seemed to be screaming with the wind blowing them any which way. The trees were straining to stay on the ground. Was Ricky still out there?

We all of us ran back onto the porch. Ricky was still sitting outside on the same seat and in the same position. He still had his back to the house and now had his Bible open. I stepped off the porch with the idea that I would have to drag my brother in, but someone behind me pulled me back on to the porch. I yelled out to Ricky, “there‘s a twister headed towards us! Get in now.”

Ricky turned to looked at me. He said, “As long as I am reading the Bible, nothing can happen to me.” He turned calmly back around and carried on reading the Bible. The weather was carrying on doing its bit. Piles of hail would build up, then scatter in the next gust of howling wind. I noticed that the spot next to Ricky stayed dry. There was no hail build up there. An invisible car wiper (or tail) seemed to swish to and fro, keeping the back of the bench dry at that spot as well. As for Ricky, there was nothing we bunch of young boys could say or do to get him to come inside.

After another minute or so, the wind died down. Ricky stood up and walked back into the house and went to his bedroom. He had lost interest in the TV report about the storm. Some of us ventured out. When I came to where Ricky had been sitting, I could see a large dry patch. I could guess who had kept Ricky company. I went back in when the phone rang. First Raymond, then Shelia called to ask if we were alright.

Ricky did not speak to us and we left him alone. I had no idea about Dennis and Frank. They must have been in their friend’s house up the road, but did not come home even after the storm had passed. About an hour later, the news reported that a tornado had struck and damaged several houses nearby. We rang around to find out where it had happened. It was on Stacey Lane, a few blocks East.

All of us were still in a state of high excitement. When we heard where it was, all of us ran there as fast as we could. Ricky stayed home and in our room. I will never forget the sight at Stacey Lane. We had seen similar devastation, but only on TV. The five of us were standing in front of three double storied homes, except that now there was not a single one of them standing. There were wooden boards and splintered sides everywhere; some were lying haphazardly in the next street. One house had had its front wall ripped off and we could see broken furniture inside, furniture which looked like something someone had brought in from the furniture dump in the empty lot next door.

As many trees had also been uprooted in the tornado. One had cracked near its base and was lying across the length of the road. Its branches were strewn all over. The tornado had decided to zero in here. The adults and children who lived here had luckily heeded the weatherman. They had all gathered in a house which had the inside room. This house had stayed intact and people in this locality were able to escape the worst effects of the tornado. There was a lot of information we could take to school. But I faced a small interruption now.

I thought I heard the swish of a gliding bird. I thought I heard a chirruping voice. It told me to hurry back home. I was, and the rest of us were happy to head back to our homes at this point. We had had a long tiring day and needed our homes, our dinners and our families. We parted and each of us headed home. When we spoke later about this day of the storm and of the tornado, all of us admitted feeling apprehensive as we headed home. We hoped that none of us would be as shocked as we had been when we witnessed the devastation in Stacey Lane.

Ricky was scribbling away furiously when I got home. He knew that I had entered. He now told me without looking up that he would not have been able to deflect the tornado without Griffin. I knew that what he had said was true, but I said that I had no idea as to how Griffin could have done such a thing – prevent a tornado. Ricky still did not look up. He seemed to be speaking to Griffin. Where was Griffin?

“You can show yourself now,” was what Ricky said. Griffin materialized, front paws and beak snout first. It took Griffin ten whole minutes. Ricky spoke to him again, “tell Ray how you prevented the tornado from ripping across our drive.” So Griffin told me.

He said that I had to understand about hail, since they had opted to sit through a hailstorm. Griffin knew that I knew he was there. He had seen me look hard at the dry spot on the seat and the dry spot at the back, where he had wiped up the wet puddle with his tail. Griffin explained that hail is produced inside storm clouds (we had all focused on those) and is made of solid ice. Hailstones had to be seen to be noticed, he said.

Griffin went on to explain that ice pellets falling from the top of the cloud collect a film of moisture as they descended. Griffin had been to the tops of such clouds. He had told Ricky and both of them felt that to be in contact with hail was to be in touch with something that was pure.

Then, there was the tornado. The thunderstorm that had so thrilled us boys was the engine that fuelled the tornado which had ripped through South Austin, said Griffin. A bulge of warm moist air had crashed through into an upper layer of cool dry air. It had risen at a speed of 150 miles per hour. The moisture condensed out into a solid looking cloud. We had seen this, but did not know that it was the beginning of the tornado.

How on earth did Griffin know so much? He reminded me – before he and Ricky became friends, there was hardly a night when he was not at the Molly Dawson School library. Griffin had his ways of entering and his sister had taught him to read. That library was a treasure, Griffin said. I just had to go there and find out.

Ricky had done some reading too. But his was not all in the school library. He knew the Bible quite well and now quoted from it,

*“The noise of the thunder maketh the earth to tremble: so doth the northern storm and the whirlwind”.*

We had had the thunder that morning, and we knew that a naturally caused calamity could be on its way. Ricky explained that in Biblical times a tornado was described as a whirlwind. That is how it is best described even now, he said. Ricky said that what he had done was to concentrate on the solid looking cloud that Griffin had explained. He had focused on it and prayed with his Bible.

I had been made to understand. But I knew that the others were still mystified. They might think that chance had redirected the tornado when it twisted onto Stacey Lane. I wished that Ricky had explained all this to our friends as he had to me. But Ricky had chosen to hold himself apart from all that was going on around him. He had worked with his friend on what he believed to be true.

Did Ricky’s prayers or his then-invisible friend or both prevent the tornado from reaching our block? I still wonder.

There were no signs of Candle Face for a couple of days after that night when she had raked me with her nails and had followed it up with her type of an explanation. What with the bizarre things with the hail and tornado that had happened today and the short discussions with Griffin and Ricky, I was waking up to the fact that everyone should be encouraged to communicate what they were best at. Which took me back to my schoolwork. I could do better, and would start with what I now knew about tornados in general.

When we got back to school on Monday, studies were pushed aside. Everyone in school had special stories to tell about the hailstorm and the tornado. A couple of children had trailed the tornado with their eyes as it shuddered across its west-to-east path. But it was only my group of friends who had been curious enough to want to see its aftermath. It had been Griffin who had found out long before this particular tornado, how it had been born.

A couple of sixth graders asked Ricky for a story. Ricky had not done a story for a long time. But that afternoon, with friends from school and from the neighborhood listening in the back yard, Ricky came up with a beautiful story.

The story was about a colony of mythical beasts called Griffs who could fly on eagles’ wings. They were called beasts, but were not really so in that sense, Ricky said. He described them as being more like friendly four-legged, winged magical creatures. He should know, I thought. Well, Ricky’s magical beings lived with others like themselves. Ricky let on that their herd were never far from the largest deposits of gold. Gold for them was like any other pretty stuff. They did not think of it as something to be hoarded or stored in secrecy or demanded of others. It was just there. They lined their nests and used gold as best as they could. Nature had seen to it that their mothers laid eggs covered in gold. Their babies emerged from golden eggshells, he said.

Ricky described the magical beings at birth. They emerged by pecking through the soft gold with tiny beaks. Their front half was like a lion, except for the beak which was like an eagle’s beak. The rest of them were like the eagle, particularly their back legs. The only leonine part here was their tails, which was long and thin and ended in a tuft of lion’s fur. The babies’ wings were folded inside their golden eggshells, but they unfurled them for flight as soon as they were able to emerge.

But there was a downside to these gorgeous beasts (Ricky reminded us again about such a description not really fitting what they were). Not far from their colony in the lofty mountains was a village of one-eyed humans called Arimas. Being humans, they were greedy for gold. The Arimas knew that Griffins’ instincts about where the gold ore lay, were correct. What they also thought was that those golden eggs they laid were solid gold. They did not know about the perfect half lion – half lion offspring who waited inside.

The Griffs would not lead the Arimas to the hidden fields of gold. They saw no point in it. So the greedy humans stole their gold lined nests with the golden eggs intact. For the Arimas, it was a shortcut to getting rich. For the magical animals, it spelt doom. Their mothers cried in chirrups of lament. They wondered what they could do. Should they go down from their mountain tops to the human village and try to retrieve however many of their eggs that they could? No, said the mothers. The eggs might break and their children die.

The elders of the tribe of Griffs put together a master plan to go down to the village and retrieve their eggs. Humans were lazy, as everyone knew – had they not asked to be just led to the fields of gold so that they could grab what they could without having to make little effort? Their Griff raid would therefore be conducted at night, when it was darkest (I felt gulty about the laziness and about the described darkness).

The animals prepared, and honed their pecking, punching and tail swishing skills. They swooped down on the village after nightfall and located the areas where the eggs were hidden. They were going to have to cradle each egg carefully in their hind leg talons, cushion them with their front paws and fly quickly back to their mountain eyries. Here, Ricky stopped to explain an eyrie. They were the mountain nests of birds of prey.

The forward batch of Griff soldiers had just lifted off with their precious cargo when the first human awoke, disturbed by the air around him as the gliders took off. He was befuddled and thought he was dreaming before he realized what was happening. He alerted the other Arimas and they rushed to gather the eggs left behind and move them to a still more secret hiding place. But when the Arimas set about doing this, they did not know what to make of it. Their golden eggs were cracking, tiny beaks appearing through the cracks and little feathered and furry creatures were hopping out. The baby Griffs flapped their carefully folded wings and in the next instant, soared off, behind the adults who were carrying the first batch of eggs. Ricky added that it was a magnificent sight.

The Arimas made do with the gold in their nests and the gold in the eggshells. The Griffs got their children back. The Arimas became more wily because their greed for gold was not going to stop here. The Griffs became more vigilant in guarding their eggs.

The Griffs did not resent all humans. In celebration of the day on which their babies had been retrieved, they held a grand occasion. Their leader would fly up above thunderclouds with tiny golden pebbles in his beak. Ricky talked about the currents of warm and cold air inside the thunderstorm. He said that the strong updrafts of warm air and downdrafts of cold air worked on each pebble, the same as with icy droplets. They were carried well above the freezing level, became heavy and fell to earth in sheaths of ice around the gold. It was for children to find the tiny sparkly bits of ice.

Ricky told everyone that the next time small hail fell, anyone could collect the tiny sparkly bits of ice. He could not guarantee that there would be golden pebbles inside, but we could give it a try.

 We loved the images he evoked. The younger children told us older ones that they were entranced. Chico cheered for Ricky and said that he would try to bring Maria next time.

I need not have worried, because Ricky knew by now what he could achieve, and what he could not. Ricky ended with a poem written by someone who had died some hundred years ago, called John Milton, writing in Paradise Lost. Milton knew about the legend of the Griffs. He called them Gryfon. This was what Ricky recited:

“ As when a Gryfon through the Wilderness

*With winged course ore Hill or moarie Dale,*

*Pursues the Arimaspian, who by stelth*

*Had from his wakeful custody purloind*

*The guarded Gold [...]*

Ricky recited this in a loud, booming voice. I thought I heard a tinkling chirrup. Some of us understood some of the poem, some did not, but it sounded great all the same. Everyone clapped and stamped their feet.

**Chapter 21**

Word of Ricky’s great story got around. It had somehow connected to the hail storm, if not the tornado in Austin. But that tornado would be in our minds till the next one gave us more to think and talk about. Ricky knew that not everyone was pleased about the kudos his hailstorm story had won for him. I was hoping that he would go back to being the old, outgoing Ricky who would think up such stories for our entertainment. I also thought I didn’t want the same old Ricky in that he would again take to beating and bullying his younger brother.

Summer was on us as we carried on with what we had to do in school and at home. My teachers seemed pleased with me for a change. They had indicated that I was taking some sort of an interest in studies and in projects to do with storms and the natural world. I was expecting a better report at the end of this semester than I had ever had before.

The trees along our walk to school had turned glorious and leafy green. The time for storms was now behind us. Michael and I had a great many matters to discuss and a great deal to see on our morning walk to school. One day Michael and I caught up with Ricky at the creek as we walked to school. Ricky still walked to school on his own on most days, but on this particular day he was walking with Robert. It was going to be a good walk with our group, or so I thought until I literally stopped in my tracks.

The others with me stopped as well. I did not want to believe my eyes. I could see Carlos, unofficial school bully ahead of us. This reputation had won Carlos a couple of younger and smaller sycophants and underlings who reveled in his glory. They were standing in the “safe part” of the creek. Carlos’ friends were grinning and chattering. They did not have a great variety of subjects to discuss. I thought everything they said or did was centered on Carlos, the power he wanted to wield, and ways of enhancing this. It did not augur well for anyone outside his group. The gang seemed to be doing just that. They seemed to be egging him on.

I hoped it was not going to be a repeat of last time, when Carlos had pummeled Ricky to the ground to such an extent that Ricky was near senseless and did not to make it to school. Ricky, Michael and Robert probably had similar thoughts. If he did, Ricky did not show it in his stance. He had walked straight up and stood facing Carlos.

My brain was working frantically. Could I do anything? I had tried to persuade Ricky last time this had happened, to turn around from the creek and take the long route to school.

I had run that route a great many times by now and it would be good for all of us, especially today. I suggested it to Ricky now. He said “no” and headed straight towards Carlos’ group.

Carlos walked up to Ricky, his girth giving him a funny right, then left side waddle. Carlos’ heavy shoulders were swinging back and forth and so were his arms. I cast desperate looks around me. Could no act of nature emerge right now, to stop Carlos in his path? The expression on his face made Carlos look mean, and jealously mean. He must have heard of Ricky’s success with story writing and telling, and probably had heard about his newest round of story telling and poetry reading.

Carlos knew what he was about and what he was going to do. He gave Ricky a great shove. Ricky fell down, but scrambled to his feet. He stood there, not wanting to hit back. Carlos now looked mean and confident. He was going to have his type of fun. Carlos brought up the topic of Maria. He sneered and mocked at Ricky because she had rejected him twice. All the kids crowding behind Carlos laughed too. Ricky of course just stood there expressionless, his arms hanging by his side. Michael, Robert, and I did not know what to do to stop this just- started confrontation.

If Ricky would not fight, he could pray now, I thought. His prayers may have worked wonders during the storm. He had to have thought of it now? We stood by the side of the narrow path. All of us must have been feeling helpless. I know I did. The other kids must have realized our situation and our plight. The group over on Carlos’ side were triumphant; we were weak.

Carlos took a step back. It gave him the Momentum he needed before he stepped back up to hit Ricky in the chest this time. Ricky fell to the ground but made the effort to spring up as quickly as he could. Carlos had just confirmed the general pattern of what Ricky could and would and would not do. It was the same as the last time that Carlos had got him here in the creek. Carlos did not need anyone telling him that he was the greatest. He knew that as far as Ricky and the three of us were concerned, he was invincible.

Robert decided it was time he encouraged Ricky into action. Robert did not know about Ricky’s resolution about the only way to achieve peace. He yelled, “Hit him back.” The other children repeated this, but in a mocking manner. The other lot were egging Ricky on, while they presumed that he would remain a weakling in the face of mighty Carlos .

Ricky seemed to have gathered strength in his own convictions since the tornado, though this was not going to work now. He responded with, “The Bible says to turn the other cheek.”

Carlos was menacing him. He laughed, said “OK” and he then hit Ricky again on the cheek. Ricky took the hit without resistance, fell and stood up when his feet allowed him to. Carlos kept hitting Ricky on each side of his face. Ricky would keel over from the force of the blow but he would not retaliate. Some of Carlos’ punches landed on Ricky’s chest, with the same effect. Ricky fell every time but did not stay down for long. He would get up and get the same punishment all over again.

 I was infuriated even more, when one of the children with Carlos asked him if he could have a try. This child approached Ricky and hit him in the face. As before, Ricky did not fight back. Eventually the crowd got tired of the fighting and turned away. They may have realized that their jubilation was ill-founded. Everyone did what we had set out to do. Both groups continued walking to school.

I was miserable about having to keep quiet about Carlos attacking my brother. I told no one as usual in school and at home. Michael and Robert did not bring it up either. It would be as it had been in the past, I thought. It was as though that one-sided fight by Carlos had just not taken place except for the bruises on Ricky’s face and chest.

I had seen the bruises on Ricky’s cheeks. I could only guess at those on his chest. I was not the only one, this time. One of Ricky’s grade teachers noticed it as well. Ricky and I had always denied the goings-ons at home if one of our teachers (who may have had an inkling) asked us. His teacher asked Ricky if Ricky had got hurt at home or in school or in-between. Ricky said that he had walked into a closed door.

I knew, as Ricky did, that this had been his chance to tell on Carlos. Carlos had got away with near-murder last time and this. Why could Ricky not express himself when he needed to? He was the same person who had told us that wonderful story about the Griffs. And that had been taken from something that was real….or was it? Where did reality begin for Ricky, and where did it end? I would have also like to ask this for myself.

Ricky and I walked home together from school on this day. We talked, albeit desultorily at first. This was a small improvement, I thought. I brought up the topic because it had troubled me all day. “Ricky, you don’t have to turn the other cheek that literally, you know,” was what I came up with. Ricky was silent at first, then said it was the only way out. He said that he had only been following rules laid down by those who knew better. “I heard Robert when he told me to hit Carlos back, Ray. But I did not want to. It would go against what we have been taught in church,” he said.

I was angry now. I told Ricky that he had cast aside all that nonsense about peace and love in his poetry and had, in his stories which came before the Griff story. I told Ricky that he knew that the stuff had not worked for him. Why had he refused to retaliate when a boy with an ugly soul, the most insane bully had hit him for no reason? I asked him why he could not answer his teacher truthfully?

Ricky had no answer for me. I clenched my teeth and looked up at the sky. All I could see was blue sky with a fluffy white cloud in it. The white cloud was in the form of Ricky’s friend Griffin. Ricky looked up as well and smiled. In a couple of more seconds, Griffin had swooped down to materialize near our feet and was trotting along beside Ricky, on the narrow path of the creek. Griffin knew that Ricky was in no mood to play, this afternoon. He stuck to talk.

Griffin endorsed what I had said. He told Ricky that he needed to talk to someone. He said that no authority would expect Ricky to literally translate any dictum about turning the other cheek. Annoyingly enough, Ricky paid more attention to Griffin than he had to me. I guessed that as with ‘turning the other cheek.” Ricky wanted to believe. I was impatient again. I wanted a formula which Ricky could safely use, something that would work for him. Simple dictates would not do, I thought.

I had come to accept that our lives – Ricky’s and mine, were full of surprises. The bushes by the right side of the creek began to rustle. It was followed by the offensive odor I had nearly grown familiar with. Candle Face appeared briefly and appeared to talk to Griffin. She told him that she expected him home. My terror was somewhat offset by the fact that she had not been looking for me. Ricky did not seem to have noticed her presence or her talk. Candle Face turned to me before the two of them took off. She smiled her malicious smile and said, “You don’t have to watch it at this instant. I will see you soon.”

What had she meant? As usual my thoughts were crashing around, trying to make some sense of what she had said.

Ricky and I carried on slowly home. We each of us had a great deal to think about. Ricky had shown a few days ago that deep down he still was the extrovert story teller. It had worked and we thought he was brilliant. But not every idea he tried his hand at came through as he intended it to. Neither he nor I would ever be sure about how much he had achieved on the day of the tornado. If he had tried to apply the same sort of thinking today, it had not worked. Carlos would not even be aware of the mysterious ways in which Ricky’s mind worked.

Was Ricky doomed to flashes of brilliance, but failure overall? Had this ever occurred to him?

**Chapter 22**

Ricky and I reached home without any other impediments or surprises. We walked through the front door together and were only slightly surprised to see Frank at home alone. Dennis was nowhere to be seen. Such an occurrence was rare, we knew. Frank on his own was less of a threat than the two of them together . It was, in fact, going to turn out to be a good thing today.

Frank looked at both of us as we entered. He took a long hard look at the fresh bruises on Ricky’s face. Frank stared at both of us for awhile. He looked like he was looking for the right words. Finally, he asked what had happened to Ricky’s face. It was the first time that anyone in our family had wanted to know what had happened after Ricky had got hurt.

Ricky told Frank that there was an older and bigger boy in school. He told him that this boy, whose name was Carlos, liked to beat him up. He told Frank that he had got beaten up this morning on the way to school today, when we were walking through the creek. Frank had a lot of questions. He wanted to know if Carlos had hit me. Ricky said no, Ray did not get hit. Yes, the walk through the creek was Carlos’ usual path to school. Ricky told him the whole story. He even told him how he had decided not to retaliate.

Frank was normally a mild-mannered teenager into silly jokes and tricks. Ricky and I knew he could turn into a monster, but that was when he was stoned. Frank looked like he was seething mad now. I had never seen him this angry.

Frank normally did not think very hard about anything. But now that he realized that Ricky had been willfully hurt by someone outside our family, he thought about how to get back. He formulated a plan.

Frank told Ricky that he would go to the creek the very next day. He would wait there for Carlos. Frank had taken it upon himself that Carlos would think twice about casting his arms and fists around. Frank would make sure that Carlos would mend his frightful ways, where Ricky was concerned. Ricky couldn’t believe his luck. He was thrilled. I looked at Frank in a new light and I, too, was thrilled.

I didn’t understand many things about my family, though. Why was Frank so mad now, when he’d joined Dennis in roughing up Ricky not so long ago? Frank had been the main offender, I seemed to remember. Maybe Frank was aware of the pain he had inflicted that time with the pin on the paper airplane. Maybe he did know that he had trapped Ricky and that Ricky had felt that there was no escape for him. Maybe Frank was just trying to make amends.

But Ricky was as close to ecstatic as he could get in these troubled times for him. Ricky was glad for his new friend, Griffin. And he was glad that his brother had taken it on himself to see that a bully would stop terrorizing him. What we had been taught about ‘turning the other cheek’ when faced with a vicious assault was about to come out right.

My muddled thinking over, I could say that I was proud of Frank. I was proud of him and could picture what would happen tomorrow. I could not help it, I ran out that evening to tell Robert, Eric and Michael about our mini family conference to do with Carlos. All of us were quivering in anticipation. We had pictured the various states that Carlos and his friends would be in, in our minds. We had a good many laughs. We could not wait for tomorrow.

But Candle Face came that night. I had been so happy and my imagination so wild that I forgot about Candle Face when I went to bed. I forgot to fasten the many entrances she had got used to. When I saw her in our room it must have been way past midnight. I told myself that she had evaded my precautions the last time and the time before that in any case.

My eyes opened to a darkened room with orange streetlight streaming across the ceiling. As in the past, I knew Candle Face was there because of her frightful fumes. She strode from the middle of the room to the side of my bed. Was she going to climb on and hurt me again with her nails, I wondered while I held my breath. Was I going to come as close to drowning in rot and fumes as I had last time? For now, she sat demurely on the side of my bed with her legs slung over the side and her feet on the floor.

Her long tousled hair covered the top of her face and where her eyes might have been. I shuddered at the thought of those glowing maggots which dwelt deep within the shifting sockets of her eyes and nostrils. Please, I thought, I have seen you briefly this afternoon. I thought it was over for the day – or night. She laughed her evil, gurgly laugh. “Who cares what you think, boy,” she said. She reminded me that she had said that she would see me soon.

She sat very still. I knew she would unleash her terror any Moment now. The one thought that flashed across my mind was that she had said, “You don’t have to watch it at this instant.” I had dwelt on that briefly on my walk home, then forgotten about it because of many exciting developments after that. I could clamp my hands across my mouth to stop saying things which fell out at the wrong time. But I could not do something similar to stop the thoughts of my brain. Candle Face had read these thoughts and was laughing again.

I saw the glint of eyes through the matted hair. “Did you think it was his idea?” She flashed across to me. My thoughts were stuttering as my talk sometimes did. “You? But why…” I had to stop. Then, Candle Face told me.

Griffin had encouraged Ricky to open up. He wanted better for Ricky – better than that awful bully and his tactics. Griffin and Candle Face had conferred on the matte. Candle Face knew that Ricky might not, but Frank liked a good fight. She had planted the idea in his head when Frank was busy being horrified about Ricky’s face and what could have caused it. Planted the idea in Frank’s head? I doubted that. I still had my suspicions about Frank (and Dennis) and Candle Face.

I would not have to watch it till that other matter with Ricky was settled. Candle Face told me that would see to that. I gave an invisible snort, but did not want her to notice. I still clung to the idea that it would be Frank’s doing and no one else’s. All of us were spoiling for a fight. All of us, that is, except Ricky.

I looked across at Ricky’s bed to see if he was listening to all this or whether he was sleeping through. Ricky’s bed was empty. Candle Face smiled at my lack of awareness about what went on at night. “They are out playing,” she said. She said she was going to go, but there was something she wanted to do before she left. This was a new one for me. I could not help but be surprised all over again.

Candle Face said that my sleeping sheet had come undone and that she wanted to tuck me in. I did not need her to do this. My mother could have, or I could like I did every night, I thought. But Candle Face was insistent. She rolled me over to my right side so as to slip in the left edge of the sheet. But what she did now was to slip in her right arm in under my back. I should have known that she would try something sneaky and nasty and both combined. She dug those nails into my back as she had on my chest.

I wanted to get away but could not move. Ricky! Griffin! Mom! Anyone there? My head screamed. All I felt was burning pain as she raked her talons down my back. What was all that about not having to watch it till Ricky and Frank’s adventure with Carlos was done? I had been taken for a ride once more, I told myself. I remembered her threat that I should watch my back.

I wished I were not eleven, that I were not gullible, and that I were smarter than I was. I wished I could remember when someone like Candle Face warned me about something like watching my back. I wished I was not stupid enough to turn over along the right side of my body to expose the whole of my back knowingly to her and those talons she had.

She was enjoying this. I could not even bear it, but as before, I was paralyzed. And then it happened. I heard the back porch screen door open with a creak and slam shut. Someone had come in, in a hurry. Candle Face heard it too. She hastily withdrew her arm. I was on my back on my bed once more. She took a flying leap and was out of the streetside window before the hurrying footsteps entered.

“Did you call, Ray?” was what Ricky said first thing when he ran into the room. Ricky had heard me. Was this another kind of magic from Ricky? No, said a voice in my head. He heard you alright. You brothers are going to bond in times of distress. I knew then that Frank’s concern for Ricky had been from Frank alone. Candle Face may have got to know about Frank’s intent tomorrow morning, probably because I had rushed around telling everyone. But it was Frank who was going to tell Carlos.

Ricky had told me about his secret friend. I had not been able to tell him about the fiend who visited me. But he must have had some inkling. Better still, he must have known if he could rush in like that. I wondered about Raymond and Shelia. They slept through while Ricky crept outside on any night. They had not been disturbed when Ricky had noisily run in tonight.

Ricky and I decided to turn in for the night, or whatever was left of the night. We were both looking forward to tomorrow. Ricky covered himself with his sheet and must have knocked off right away. I wrapped myself tightly in my sheet. My back still burned my I did not care about it as much as I had while Candle Face was inflicting pain. Tomorrow could not come too quickly.

The next morning Mom was again horrified at the dirt on Ricky’s feet. She made him promise to wash them before he left for school. I sprang out of bed as soon as my eyes opened to bright sunlight. I looked at the sheet I had slept on top of. Little blots of blood had leaked out of the long scratchmarks on my back. I looked away and told myself again that I did not care. ..I could not care, not today.

We realized that Frank had prepared himself and left for the creek by the time we went in to ear our breakfast. We hurriedly ate and went off to collect all the members in our group of friends. They were ready and waiting for us. We made a merry band of boys as we trooped down towards the creek.

Robert, Eric, Michael, Ricky and I took the path by the creek in a group as we walked to school. We chattered and stopped every now and then because in our excitement, we had started early. We did not walk fast, but lingered, waiting for Carlos. We craned our necks and tried too obviously, Ricky said, to see where Frank was. Ricky was annoyed about this. He said that Frank was obviously around. He told us to not to look for Frank because it might give Frank away to the other lot. If Carlos and his gang realized, it would ruin the plan, he said. Ricky was right.

I couldn’t wait anymore. The wait had wound me up so much that I started to doubt whether Frank was really hiding somewhere around the creek.

Happily, Carlos and his friends arrived at the creek at this point. They saw us hanging around. He saw Ricky. As before, he counted on Ricky being his target. Carlos yelled out, “Hey Ricky, are you waiting for your daily beating?” No one said anything. Carlos approached Ricky and pushed him. It was a powerful enough push for Ricky to fall down. Ricky got up, as expected. But he too wondered if Frank was around. I had so wanted Frank’s plans from yesterday to be successful. I wanted to see Carlos beaten and wanted to know that he would not bully Ricky again. Was Ricky going to miss out again? He was a sitting duck right now, and unless Frank showed himself Ricky would get hammered again.

I frantically looked around, but none of us could not see him. Ricky was no longer looking at Carlos. He was looking around too. Carlos asked loudly, “What’rya looking for?” Carlos pushed Ricky again.

This was bad. We had been counting on Frank. As I was about to give up on Frank, Frank appeared on the other side of the water. ! gave him points for hiding in the best possible place. If there was a pedestal around, Frank was on it. He jumped the stream and walked straight up to Carlos.

Carlos had frozen with his fist in mid air. He could not believe what his eyes were telling him. His gang were silent. They must’ve been wishing themselves elsewhere. Frank was bigger than Carlos and Frank was now loud. “So you like to pick on younger kids? So do I,” He said. In the next couple of seconds Frank had pushed Carlos with all his strength. He pushed hard enough for Carlos to fall to the ground.

It was a funny sight. We knew that Carlos was too shocked to say anything. He just sat on the ground on his haunches at looked up at Frank towering over him. Carlos made no attempt to get up. His friends made no attempt to come forward and help him up. Carlos was plain scared.

We, the kids on and around Ben Howell Drive, were, however, enjoying this. Carlos stayed on the ground, not wanting to get up. His friends were no longer laughing. Ricky, on the other hand had the biggest grin I had ever known him to have. I even hoped that Griffin was around, being invisible and watching this. He had given Ricky some support yesterday, trying to get him to get his nerve up and talk to somebody. It had worked and Frank was here now, defending Ricky.

“Get up, punk.” Frank commanded Carlos. Carlos remained on the ground. Frank then decided to help Carlos up off the ground. Once Carlos was up, Frank pulled his arms backwards, twisted and held them towards his spine with one arm. Carlos was immobilized. Frank used his free hand to hit Carlos at full speed and strength on the lower lip. Down Carlos went again. I could see the blood spurting from his lip.

The other kids abandoned Carlos and ran for their lives. Carlos was now alone. He had felt the blood trickle down and instinctively reached for the bottom edge of his shirt. He tried to clean up a bit with the shirt. As soon as he’d done that, the damage was clearly visible. Carlos’ bottom roll of teeth had actually cut through his lower lip with the impact of Frank’s fist. I could see his teeth sticking out of his lower lip. I will never forget that sight.

I thought briefly of Candle Face and her messed up face. Perhaps I could think of her more than I could, of Carlos’ damaged rabbit looks and teary eyes. We laughed all the way to school, adding to Carlos’ humiliation. This had been the best fight ever. Frank walked nonchalantly off, sticking his bloodied knuckles into his pocket.

All of us were in high spirits that day in school…in fact we stayed in high spirits for a couple days. Mine ended when Candle Face blocked my path another couple of days later. In school that day I saw the sixth grade teacher who had asked Ricky about his bruises walk up to damaged Carlos and talk to him. Carlos was not Ricky and quickly pointed in our direction. We were now crowded around Ricky. The teacher looked towards us, shook his head and stared back hard at Carlos. We had got the sense of this charade. Carlos had got it too. Carlos had tried to blame us and the teacher had not believed Carlos. The teacher was now striding off.

Strictly speaking, none of us were responsible for what had happened to Carlos. I thought that he had brought it on himself. Ricky may not have been a boy to retaliate, but that did not mean that Ricky was not a boy not to do anything about it. We ran out and whooped for joy.

Dennis and Frank were at the dinner table that night. All of us had noticed Frank’s knuckles as he cut the meat. Dennis, Raymond and Shelia were noticing them for the first time. Frank ate quietly and Dennis looked amazed. Shelia had always been naturally reserved, even with us, her family. Raymond put his knife and fork down, looked directly at Ricky and asked what had happened. Frank answered that his knuckles had come down on a set of teeth which had got in the way. Everyone but Shelia laughed. Raymond looked relieved. They thought that Frank had been joking. Ricky and I knew that he was telling the truth.

 Ricky never had a problem with Carlos ever again. I liked to think that this incident drew Frank, Ricky and me a little closer. I thought that Dennis would follow soon enough.

**Chapter 23**

I was in the fourth grade at Molly Dawson Elementary School in South Austin, just a mile away from our house on Ben Howell Drive. Ricky, a year and a half older than me, was comparatively senior in Molly Dawson. We were old enough to manage our early morning schedule quite well without our parents. My parents worked hard and they worked long hours. They would have to leave for work on most days before we left for school.

I would get dressed and sit down to breakfast before I left for school. My mother would leave cereal out on the dining room table for us. All of us brothers ate our breakfast after Raymond and Shelia had left. Dennis had a large appetite which meant that if he got to the table before Frank or Ricky or I did, there wouldn’t be anything left for the rest of us. There had been times when I had to go to school hungry because Dennis had eaten everything. Mom, in the meanwhile, put my lean looks down to my running.

One day, I noticed that Dennis had got to the breakfast table before me. I groaned inwardly when I arrived there, but then noticed that there were still plenty of rice crispies in its box. I poured the cereal into my small bowl, then I poured the watered down milk into the cereal. I placed my ear near the bowl just an inch from the top. I loved to hear the snap-crackle-pop of the cereal.

The Saturday morning Rice Crispy cereal commercials during the 1970 and 1980s suggested that the cereal had something to say. This was the reason why I would always try to listen as carefully as possible to the milk and crispies in the bowI. My brother Dennis saw me doing this and he moved from his chair to sit next to me.

“Do you know what they are saying?” Dennis asked.

“No, what?” I asked. My eyes were as wide as they could get. I was (part) verifying the message in the cereal ad, and was part pleased that Dennis had taken such an interest in me. Up until now I had wanted to believe that the cereal could really talk. Now that my eldest brother had asked about what the Rice Crispies were saying, I was closer to that belief.

Dennis kidded along with me for a bit, and then lost interest. He had just thought of something…maybe he should make sure in the absence of my parents, that I get to school. He said, “Hurry up and eat, or you will be late for school.” I looked at Dennis, then placed my ear back near the rim of the bowl. All I could hear was the snap-crackle-and-pop from the cereal.

“You have to pay close attention. Listen real hard.” Dennis was probably kidding me. He got up and left the table.

I kept my ear where it was. My doubts about cereals talking started to flood back. Dennis *had* to be fooling me. The cereals by now were getting soggy and silent. The snap-crackle-and-pop was going out of them.

I sat up and dug my spoon into the cereal and tasted it. The cereal was still slightly crunchy. I put the spoon down and placed my ear back just inside the bowl. The snap-crackle-pop came back, but with less gusto. I listened hard for any sounds from the “talking cereal.”

Success. I heard a faint, tiny “hello”. I quickly lifted my head and looked straight into the bowl but could only see a mess of milk and cereal. What was that? I went back to one ear near the top of my cereal and milk. There it was again: A small voice, “hello?”

“Hello?” I answered. My brothers looked at me as if I was crazy. “Am I crazy? I just heard my cereal talk to me!” I thought to myself.

I did not want to make a big deal of my discovery when the three of them were looking at me like that. I raised my head, brought my face closer to the cereal inside my bowl. “Hello? Who are you?” I whispered close to it.

But what came back to me was the hoarse, coarse voice I dreaded and had heard countless times. It was Candle Face. I also heard her say to me, clear as day, “watch your back when you walk to school today.” Not that again! She had meant it in terms of my back last time. I was just getting over the worst scratches that she had inflicted on me. I decided that I preferred cereal talk any day.

I was letting off steam. I was expecting cute talk from cute cereal, not her again. I wasn’t thinking. I yelled back at her to shut up. I said this out loud. All my brothers were looking at me as though I was crazy. Was I addressing any of them? I did not want any misunderstandings first thing in the morning and one which I would lose. Dennis now imposed his brand of discipline. He shouted at me. He said that I had to stop fooling with my food and get to school. I would have to get up and get out.

I got up, left the cereal on the table, grabbed my books and ran out of the house. I ran as fast as I could to Michael’s house. He had a role to play, especially in the light of that warning from Candle Face about walking to school.

Up until now she had not dared to show herself when there had been someone else who was active and awake. There had been a few occasions when Candle Face and Griffin, Ricky and me had been together. I had noted every time that Ricky somehow managed to overlook Candle Face. Hopefully, Michael’s presence would keep her away from me. Besides, I always felt safe when Michael was around, though I was older. Michael would be my protector.

I reached Michael’s house and as always, I banged on his the window of his bedroom to let him know that I had arrived. I then moved quickly to the front door as he expected me there. He would be there when I rang his front doorbell and we would set out together. I went through our usual I-have-arrived routine, but by the time I got to the front door, Michael was not there. Had he missed that banging on his window? I went back to his window and I banged on it again.

I also peeked through a gap in the window shade and could see Michael in bed, asleep! Dennis had predicted that I would be late for school today, but I was not going to be the only one.

I repeated my practice of banging on the window and ringing his doorbell once again. I came back to Michael’s bedroom window and banged on it a hard as I could. Michael stirred slightly and began to move. He opened his eyes and looked around. He twisted his neck towards the window and realized it was me. I could see that something was wrong in the manner in which he walked to the window. Michael was just not well.

“Ray, I am not going to school today. I feel sick.”

“What? You have to go to school today.” I replied. I was not thinking. That was some reply to a boy who was probably running a temperature.

Michael was looking awful. He was not going to argue today. All that he could say was, “No, I can’t.”

I knew I was in trouble. How was I going to walk to school on my own today, of all days? With Candle Face telling me to watch my back and without Michael, I was doomed.

Michael closed the window. Hadn’t I done something like this to Candle Face sometime ago? I could swear that I could hear faint laughter. Then again, it could have been the wind.

I slowly walked away from Michael’s house towards the creek a hundred meters or so away. The way past the creek was our only short cut to school. There was a long way, but I had to plan in advance when I wanted to run it. I know I had suggested the long route to Ricky when I wanted him to avoid Carlos, but the long way was easily ten times longer.

I had to take the path past the creek. I could not afford to be late again. Another tardy arrival would definitely get me another pink slip and I did not want to get into any more trouble at school, or at home.

I was running again, this time to the creek. I had to get over this as quickly as I could. I carried on running. I ran across the bridge over the creek. I looked down the worn-down path to see if I could find any evidence of Candle Face. I also looked into the knee-deep water of the creek, up and down the surrounding trees and every possible place where she could be hiding. My heart was thumping, whether from anxiety or exertion I could not tell. I could see no signs of Candle Face.

I took a couple of steps down the path, my senses on full alert. The bushes around me could have been a tropical forest and I was the soldier who had to make it through to the other side under pain of his own life. Nothing happened to me or anyplace around me. I had slowed down to a fast walk. But still, nothing happened. By now I was about half way through the creek.

All I felt was a sense of relief. Maybe the Candle Face type of voice in the cereal was part of a bad dream. Cereal does not talk I told myself, never mind the commercials and older brothers. I walked briskly down the path where it ended in a dead end street. I told myself later that I had let my guard down at the point where I stepped off the path and onto the street just before it came to a dead end.

But I was blissfully unaware of the danger that stalked me. I did not know that I had consciously let me guard down. I thought I had come out of the dangerous bit alright. Could I congratulate myself? Yes. “I am safe! I made it.”

Suddenly, I felt something wrap around my right leg. It had wrapped itself around and gave my leg a little tug. I fell down – unfortunately head first. My books flew to the front and scattered on the asphalt. My poor back and head hit the ground. I was facing upwards.

I saw her clearly. Candle Face was lying on her stomach in the high grass a foot away. I could see her eyes for the first time. Her eyes were green and they were wide open. Her mouth was open too. But her face was clearly charred. I could only carry on comparing it with melted candle wax. I had noticed this before and could now confirm that Candle face had no nose, though she did have nostrils. She did not have cheek bones or a chin. These parts of her face must have completely burned away.

I stared in horror, I could not help myself. But she seemed to be enjoying my reaction. She laughed and said, “What did you expect?” Her right hand still had a firm grip on my right ankle. She yanked me towards her and before I knew it, I was in the tall grass with her. As used to happen at home in my bedroom and in my bed, I could not move or move away in her presence.

She now managed to stand. She strode towards the creek, dragging me through the grass. I tried to resist, to hang on to clumps of earth and grass, but as always, it was of no use. She managed to drag get me to the very edge, where the grassy verge ended and the water flowed.

Was I going to die? Candle Face had carried on with single-minded purpose. She did not talk in her noticeable voice. She encouraged no speech from me. But then she knew that I was mute on such occasions. She jumped into the knee-high water and I was now getting pulled in with her. I really did not know what to expect. The water around her appeared to sizzle and boil. I could feel how hot it had turned. In another second, it was hotter than hot and burning my skin. I no longer resisted. I was close to giving up completely. *She* knew I was in pain and she loved it.

Suddenly, I sighted the unlikeliest of help. Some kids were skipping down the path which ran beside the creek. They seemed to be in a hurry, telling each other that they must run, “hurry up, otherwise we will be late.” The spectre of the pink slip hung over them as well. They may have been Carlos’ sycophants but I did not care, as long as they could help.

But Candle Face was determined. As the children passed by within a foot of us, she pulled me downwards. Now I was completely immersed, under the water, unable to flail my arms or legs. She held my mouth and nose shut with one hand and she dug what felt like a claw into my side. Her little bony fingers felt like knives. Worse, I could see children’s running legs just above the surface.

The underwater reflections in the water rippled, disturbed by Candle Face as she thrashed around trying to keep me down, trying to drown me.

This is it, I thought. I wasn’t holding my breath because I had no breath to hold. My lungs would burst because I had not got a chance to draw in air before I had been dragged in. The last pair of a child’s legs disappeared down the path. There was nothing and no one who could help me now. Candle Face was confident that no one could help me now. She now pulled me out of the water.

Air! I tried to take that deep breath I should have taken earlier, but she quickly pushed me back underwater so that I now took in a lot of water. I started to cough and splutter. Which meant that I was taking in even more water. Somewhere, my senses were telling me that with water in my lungs, I was bound to die. I felt myself blacking out. Everything was gone. It felt like forever.

I woke up in my own bed coughing up water from my mouth and nose. My brother was already awake. He yelled at me, “What’s wrong with you?” I looked at him and hoped I could talk soon, given how much I water I would have to bring up. But my voice came out normal. We were back to our verbal sparring. I said, “None of your business.” I could see no water near my nose and mouth that I had sensed an instant ago! What was all that about? What could have happened? It must have just been a dream.

Most people would have been relieved to find out that it was only a dream. But I was to realize that my nightmare had merged with my real life. Had I not thought recently that this was the case with Ricky?

I got dressed for school and sat down to eat breakfast. Dennis had come to the breakfast table before I had. He handed me a small bowl and a box of Rice Crispy cereal. I poured in the watered down milk. The snap-crackle-pop took off instantly.

Events were repeating themselves. Dennis then sat down next to me and asked, “Do you know what they are saying?”

I remembered the rest of the day up to the point when I had woken up in bed to hear Ricky shout at me. Please, don’t let the rest of it happen again, I pleaded in my head. It may have been a case of *déjà vu,* but under these circumstances that was to be avoided.

Dennis was blissfully unaware of my predicament or of my dream. He had decided to play the part of the older, responsible adult. He continued, “they are saying, hurry up and eat, or else you will be late for school.”

I did not need a second cue. I looked up at Dennis, picked up my books and ran out the house. I ran to Michael’s house and banged on the window. As in my dream, he did not answer the front door. This was another repeat. I banged again and peeked inside.

Michael was still asleep. I knew he was sick and would not go to school today. I could not walk to school today on my own. I would not walk though the creek alone. I could not stay at home either.

But this time, I knew what I had to do. I decided to walk to the nearby H.E.B. grocery store and walk around our area instead. I knew Candle Face would not show her face in a crowded place. I would spend the day around people.

I knew I would be a runner some day. I would run my route. I was looking forward to running today, but it had to be around a place where there were people. The path past the creek would either be deserted, or have kids who were going to be late to school. I was not going to take that route. I would just have to play hooky from school.

I crept home. Ricky must have gone to school on his own, as he preferred to. Dennis and Frank were having an argument. It would be easy for me to sneak into my bedroom.

I tugged at the door to my room and it opened easily. I walked across to the door to the living room, then hesitated. Dennis and Frank’s argument, it seemed, was about who-finished-the-rice-crispies. Dennis had not left any for Frank. Dennis had an excuse. He was chortling to himself and to Frank as he said, “she asked me to. She could not bear to leave any more messages in the snapping and crackling. “

That ‘she’ again. One who had spoken to me in her hoarse growl in my cereal mess. The one who had dictated that I go for a run today. It suddenly struck me that that awful dream and its repetition this morning might be another setup. What if my planned run still got me to a secluded spot where she could wrap her arm around a leg and drag me into a water body? I stood still. I had outwitted Candle Face just once before, the time of the windows. That was because I had been able to guess what she would do next.

I felt like I had emerged to safety from some war. I knew what I had to do next. It did not include going for a run. Dennis and Frank may have plans for their day. I did not think it involved coming into my bedroom. I lay down in my bed and tucked my sheet around me the way I liked it. I was going to have a very long snooze. I was going to watch my back.

**Chapter 24**

It was a Saturday and both Ricky and I had been asked over to Nick’s house to spend the day. Ricky said that he did not want to go. I wondered at this. I knew I would go. I even tried to persuade Ricky to come with me. I tempted him with how much fun we were sure to have, and what a good cook Nick’s grandmother was. She was the only person I knew (and probably everyone one in Austin knew) who cooked everything at home. Not only that, her home made fare was not stuffy and boring. It was delicious. Nick’s grandmother had asked the two of us to come early. That way, we could have breakfast and lunch, was the word she had sent through Nick.

I knew that I wanted to stay till teatime. I was so looking forward to the day at Nick’s that I even asked him what they did for breakfast. I hoped it would not be rice crispies and milk. I need not have worried. Nick said that his grandmother made blueberry pancakes every Saturday. I had never had those made at home. Nick even told me what she made every day of the week, but I did not want to hear. It would have made me feel awfully sorry for myself…and for Ricky. I even tried telling Ricky that was going to have to miss the sort of breakfast he might never get. Sadly, that turned out to be true.

My house seemed empty as I said goodbye to Ricky that morning. I had tried to persuade him to come with me at the last moment because I knew he would not be able to manage if our brothers had any nasty plans for this Saturday. But Ricky said that Frank would never go back to being the way he had been, not after he had put Carlos in his place. Ricky said that he had work to do. He asked me to bring home a piece of whatever food was best at Ricky’s grandma’s.

I was deep in thought as I walked away that morning, ready to walk the two blocks further west. I seemed to be the only person about. Everyone like my parents who had to go to work on Saturday had driven off. It was only people like Ricky and me who normally stayed home on a Saturday, who were still there. I noticed the smell from Sonny’s sewer truck parked outside his home.

That smell always hit us when the sewer truck was there. I seemed to think that the sewer truck had been there for weeks. It had not left the spot where it had been parked outside Sonny’s house. It was Sonny’s truck that he took to clean up the sewers in Austin on his job.

Sonny was Laurie’s father and Laurie was Frank’s girlfriend. Her family lived up the street from our house and Frank was happy to be there most of the time. But, Sonny had become seriously ill and bedridden. Sonny’s family, including Laurie, were busy with him. Frank still spent a lot of his time up at Laurie’s house, but Sonny’s illness was by now getting everyone down. Now Frank was sleepwalking practically every night when he was home and looked like he was having bad dreams.

Shelia had even tried locking him into his room because Frank tended to wander around in his sleep. There had been one occasion when he had come into our room and for a second I had thought of him as Candle Face. I was relieved when he passed the light behind him. The orange halo around Frank’s head had been distinctively different to Candle Face’s.

I fell to musing about what made Frank sleepwalk. Did he have to have bad dreams, or did he have to do something in those dreams? There was Ricky who talked and thrashed around in his sleep. And there was me. I wished again that I had not run around the empty lot on that fateful night and that I did not have to see Candle Face when she came. As for Dennis, he was becoming a bad dream.

I wondered if my friend Nick had any such problems. He was kind and honest, helpful and intelligent. He had told me when we had started out in kindergarten that he had never seen his father and that his mother had died soon after he was born. His grandparents had brought him to live in South Austin. He said that he would have not have liked to have it any different.

Any of us could see that Ricky was well looked after. His family made him glad and he intended to make them happy as well. I felt that his house gave out a good feeling. Today I was going to make the most of the meals at his house, and generally being there and sharing things with him.

I had run to Nick’s house. It was partly running practice and partly the fact that I could not wait to get there. Nick was waiting for me and we went straight in for breakfast. It was the best breakfast that I have ever had and yes, Nick’s grandmother had cooked a mountain of blueberry pancakes. I stuffed myself before we went out to play in their yard.

We had been playing outside when Nick’s grandmother sent us inside because it was too hot to play outside, she said. He and I were playing in his room, when I heard what sounded like a gunshot in the near-distance but not too near. We paused in the middle of our game and gave the sound some thought. Maybe it was an old car that had backfired? The thought of a real shooting was exciting, but rare in our South Austin area.

We again had our doubts a few minutes later when we heard sirens. There were lots of them and each had a slightly different tone or intensity or alarm. It sounded like many vehicles were converging somewhere, all with their siren on. We were right, because police cars, a fire truck and an ambulance had rushed to Ben Howell Drive with their lights flashing and sirens on. I did not know this at the time.

We spoke about what we had heard was probably a gunshot. Nick’s grandfather thought so too. The noise from the sirens meant that someone’s gun had gone off a few blocks away.

A fire truck zoomed by Nick’s house. We ran outside and tried to run behind it but it sped off. We noticed that it was heading towards my street. In the next few seconds, there was complete silence. All the sirens stopped abruptly.

Nick and I started to walk towards my house but within a couple of yards I had gone back to sprinting. I guess I was a little worried. I got past two blocks and waited for Nick to catch up in the complete silence around us. As we got to the bottom of the street and turned into Ben Howell Drive, we saw a couple of police cars, ambulances and the fire truck crowding the other end of the street. I was walking cautiously now.

Nearer my house Ricky saw us and ran up. He did not have the silent, determined look he had sported during the tornado and this morning. Ricky looked excited, enthusiastic and involved, as though he was part of a drama that was going on. I asked him what was going on.

Ricky replied, “Sonny committed suicide. He shot himself.” I was stumped. I now had an explanation for what we had heard and seen, but could not believe Ricky’s words. In all my eleven years, I had never come across anyone who had taken their own life. I was shocked that someone Frank knew – and therefore I knew, had done this. And that it had happened so close to us. I thought it only happened in faraway places. I also couldn’t believe how animated Ricky was by the fact of Sonny’s suicide.

Ricky remained very busy. He had become less outgoing lately, but now he wanted to rekindle his association with every person who lived on our street or anyone walking down and he wanted to talk. Ricky even met some of the men and women at the telephone company at the end of our street during their lunch hour. For the next several hours, Ricky ran up and down the street. He would stay on our porch or living room till he saw someone walking up and then would run out to tell them. Including the people at the telephone company, Ricky made sure that the person first heard the gory details of Sonny’s suicide from him. He really looked like he thought that Sonny’s suicide had brought about a new focus to our street and to the neighborhood.

I asked Ricky what he was talking at length about. Sonny had killed himself, but it had been quick and shocking. The police cars and ambulance had done what needed to be done. Sonny’s body had been taken away and we supposed the forensics people would do whatever was necessary before the family held a funeral for Sonny. Our parents and their other friends would spend time with Sonny’s family, trying to get them to feel less wretched about the way that Sonny had chosen to die.

Ricky gave me a you’re-too-young-to-know-about-these-things look. But I was still asking. So Ricky said that he would tell me about a particular suicide, and the effects it had had on everyone. It was just a story, he said. He said that I should not be afraid. Ricky had read about the story a year ago, but he had not been able to get it out of his head. I knew that I could not be afraid about a story after what Candle Face was doing, during her frequent visits at night. I did not tell Ricky this, but I wanted to know his suicide story.

There was this girl, who was smart, intelligent and beautiful. She had been to University and all the rest of it and had studied to be an astrophysicist (whatever that was). She had got herself a job at the best astrological institute in Texas and seemed to love it. Her life was going fine – she had not been ill like Sonny and did not seem to have anything to kill herself for, but that was what she did. By shooting herself with a small Colt, as Sonny had. And not just that, she shot herself some four times.

The case had been famous, Ricky said, because they could not figure out how a person could shoot herself more than once. She had been dead after the first bullet. Ricky had followed the investigation, he told me, because he was keen to know why someone so brilliant and happy with her life should want to kill herself. I wanted us to stop here. I wanted to tell Ricky at this point about Candle Face and what she was doing to me. I wanted to ask him how he felt about his life, about how good it was to have an invisible friend around, or much of the time, anyway. What if the astrophysicist who killed herself with four bullets had any hidden sorrows, or if felt bad about stuff she could not show to the world?

I did not get a chance to ask or to talk about all this because Ricky was carrying on with his story. He had now come to the part where he was talking about how the girl felt and which would have fitted in with my question, had I asked. Well, she may have been an astrophysicist who knew her books and knew her job, he said, but she had been looking around at other stuff in life. Ricky had found out that she had spent some four months in Africa, working with the people in a village. She had done this for some other bookish society and had written a paper to say that her work, or similar work by other people, was just not enough. She had done similar work to try and improve the life of very sick people here in America, and was not happy because she felt that ill or infirm or poor people could not be looked after enough. She had been unhappy for others, in short.

Ricky felt that she had killed herself because she could see how imperfect things were for everybody else. When he had spoken to our friends and neighbors and the people in the telephone company, he had asked them if they remembered the case of the famous astrophysicist. They had, and each of them had had little snippets to offer, which would help Ricky try to understand.

One person used to see her driving to work every morning. Not only was she very beautiful and well qualified, he said, but she looked very young. She had achieved much at a young age. Ricky wondered if she had chosen the wrong line of professional work. It made Ricky wonder if she should have, and whether he now should, study religion more closely, to see what he could do for others. Someone else told Ricky that the girl had been a quiet girl in school and that she had probably been an introvert. She had to have been, Ricky thought, to think everything through, as he had been till Sonny’ s suicide today.

People were also talking about Sonny, about how he feared the worst from his illness. How he thought that the suicide by gunshot would put an end to the pain of illness. Virginia was a neighbor who thought that Sonny should not have jumped to the conclusion that he would die. She worked at the hospital in the city and would nurse older people who had been ill but were in good spirits. They took an interest in a great many things, including getting back to work, Virginia said. Ricky thought of Sonny’s plumbing business and the truck that smelt even now and jostled for space with police car, ambulance and fire truck on Ben Howell Drive. Sonny was another person who had chosen the wrong line of work for himself, said Ricky. He did not think that Sonny could look forward to going back to his job in the sewer truck.

Virginia had also always taken an interest in matters up and down our street, as with trying to discipline us when we created a huge noise playing on the empty lot. She had tried unsuccessfully to get Sonny to do something about the telltale signs of his work in the sewers – the sewer truck on our street. She said she felt awful now, for having to talk to him about it. Virginia looked at Ricky as though she had resigned herself to all the neighborhood stuff which could be improved, but which she could not do much about.

We could see that Ricky was going to be busy with the street and the attention that Sonny’ s suicide had brought to our street. In the meanwhile Nick and I went off to our backlot and carried on playing. Nick went as far as Sonny’s house, but all that he was doing was to admire all the trucks and cars which had arrived in the minutes after we had heard the gunshot. He went home before it got dark. Ricky stayed out on the street or on our porch on his own.

Frank came home late that night and seemed to be in a daze. He had been trying to console his girlfriend Laurie. Ricky badgered Frank with a lot of questions. He asked about the type of gun that Sonny had used. Frank looked nervous, something that I had not seen with Frank. Ricky wormed it out of Frank that Sonny had given the pistol that he had used, to Laurie for safe keeping till about a month ago. Frank had come across it in Laurie’s safekeeping place and had handled it briefly till Laurie took it back off him.

Raymond was annoyed and uspet about this. He shouted at Frank for having shown interest in someone else’s firearms. He lectured Frank about how easy it was for people to leave ammunition behind in a pistol be and how easy it was for a .22 calibre to go off by mistake. Frank, of course, said he could not care less, and showed it. Ricky kept badgering Frank with questions until Raymond and my mother put an end to that. Frank stalked off to his room after dinner. He did not want to go to his friend’s garage for the music, not tonight.

All of us felt terrible about the way that Sonny had chosen to take his life. None of us hung around after dinner. Ricky sat up writing in our room but that was one night that I did not have to switch off the light since he was working. I tossed and turned in my bed with our light on. I saw no signs of Candle Face on this day when death visited our street. But Ricky, I could see, had his arm around something while he wrote. Just before I fell asleep I thought Ricky looked peaceful as he wrote his story. I could not see Griffin, but I thought I heard a little chirrupy grunt. I heard nothing else. When our mother came in to wake us up in the morning she told us that we had fallen asleep with the light on.

## Chapter 25

Raymond loved to watch the TV show *All in the Family* after work. It was a daily ritual with him. I kept him company most of the time. Instead of staying in our room most of the time, Ricky now began to join us on our TV watching couch. Sometimes he brought his scribbling pad with him and wrote things down. He probably had better ideas about the episodes than the people writing the script.

In several of the episodes, Archie, the main character, pretended to shoot himself in the head with an imaginary revolver. In other episodes, he would use an imaginary rope and pretend to hang himself. This was particularly noticeable when Archie had to enact the fact that he wanted a way out because his wife would not stop nagging him. When she took off on TV, Raymond would pass a few comments to warn himself and us about what was going to happen. He would then laugh and settle down to watch the gestures which had become predictable on Archie’s part.

Ricky seemed to want to be with us and wanted to watch TV. He was now following *All in the Family* as closely as we were. I noticed that Ricky would get a bit keyed up, make his fists into imaginary pistols and get ready to imitate Archie. Ricky also took up a great interest in small guns and pistols around this time. He asked Frank if he could see the pistol that Sonny had shot himself with. Frank frowned for once and told Ricky that the police had taken it away.

Ricky was not going to let Frank go. He asked him again about small guns in general. Frank told Ricky to go look in books in the city library if he was so interested, but discouraged him from real live guns and ammunition. Raymond’s comment to Frank about guns in general seemed to have paid off when it came to Frank having to deal with his younger brother.

After Sonny ended his own life, Ricky would imitate the pretend shooting stunt often. He had carried the details of Sonny’s suicide through to his stories and still talked to anyone who had not heard. It came to a point when Ricky was embellishing the suicide story for children in school and any other kids who walked with us to school. Everyone was fascinated by the way Ricky could pretend-shoot himself at speed and slip the noose of the pretend lasso on to his neck.

Though Ricky and I had been regular church goers, it did not matter to him any more whether we were at home, school, or church when he copied Archie’s antics. Worse, he did Archie’s stunt with the imaginary rope as effectively. I sometimes thought that he did it better than Archie, with his head tilted to one side at the end of an imaginary rope, and with his tongue hanging out after the noose had been tightened.

Ricky’s ability with the pretend hanging became part of Ricky’s dramatics, as when he was on stage. The pretend gun and the noose hanging were now part of Ricky’s repertoire up in the tree house. He seemed to love to oblige these requests now, as much as he had the earlier ones for drama and magic. Ricky copied Archie so well with the imaginary gun and the imaginary rope that his skills at these antics became legendary. He would invariably be asked to perform one or both of the two stunts. Ricky was good at them and he never turned down anyone’s request for this bit of live entertainment.

Surprisingly, Mom noticed all this. She complained to Raymond that his TV watching habits were ruining her rules that any shooting was unacceptable in our house. Ricky and I had never played with toy guns, and I suppose, nor had Dennis and Frank. She said that she knew that besides Sonny who had shot himself dead for real some weeks ago, and Archie on TV, there was a lot of play shooting going on at home and among the boys in our locality and that it would come to no good. Mom did not mention Ricky or any of us by name.

Raymond looked terribly embarrassed about Ricky’s habits learnt from TV. He had not exactly gone out of his way to encourage TV, but he realized that it had not been all good for Ricky. He still did not read the writings in Ricky’s notebooks which Ricky had offered to him. I still noticed the little, insensitive gestures from my family. Raymond had been nothing but a model father to me. He had steadily encouraged my running. Why could he not encourage Ricky’s simpler ambitions like writing?

At the time Raymond, Ricky and I carried on watching *All in the Family* and Archie on TV. When Ricky got down to his copy of shooting himself with the gun and hanging himself with the rope, Raymond and I overlooked it. Raymond had not forgotten Shelia’s comments and we now looked the other way when Ricky did his bits. We knew what Shelia had told us off about. Looking back, we should have tried to stop him then.

I had not seen Ricky’s invisible friend for a long time, not had I heard him. I was, as always, worried about Candle Face, though she seemed to be quiet for now. As expected, she was there one night after I had tucked myself in but could not go to sleep. As expected, Ricky was fast asleep and carried on sleeping while she tormented me.

She came in quietly and stayed quiet for so long that at first I did not wake up to the fact that she had come in to our room. But she had and she was studying the two of us, not just me. At first I could only see her outline in the outside street lamp. My initial hope was that it was not Candle Face’s outline. Maybe it was Frank sleep walking into our room, as he had before. But my spirits sank. Even a quick look indicated that those dreadlocks highlighted by the street lamp could only belong to Candle Face. I could sense her glare but not see her eyes. I could feel her hot breath but could not hear the rasp as she drew air in and expelled it. The smell of her still struck me in the face.

As was her habit, Candle Face slowly progressed with her one-sided conversation. Candle Face was pointing at Ricky and talking and she wanted me to hear what she had to say. She was ranting about Ricky’s antics in which he pretended to shoot himself in the head with his handgun and the drama in which he died on a noose at the end of a rope.

Candle Face enacted this by using her withered, fibrous arms and hands as a pistol. She crept up to Ricky’s face and head with an evil grin on her shifting, unformed face and held her deformed hand near his head like a hand held gun. I did not hear my heart thump, but thought it had stopped for an instant. Was she going to force any bad magic out of the skeletal remains of her digits and her hands onto Ricky? Was she showing to me that she could bring about another death? In which case Ricky would be in trouble as he lay sleeping. But Ricky carried on sleeping.

Candle Face had saved the worst for me as had now become normal for her to do. She turned her head and slowly walked towards the foot of my bed. I, however, was still feeling relieved on Ricky’s account. I was relieved because she had left him alone for the time being.

As always, I was not prepared for what Candle Face had in mind for me. She placed one bony knee and then the other between my feet. I could not bear it. I could not move, so Candle Face made space for herself between my feet. I wished I could have stopped that, because she took advantage of my revulsion to inch forward on her knees. Finally, she was on my chest, blocking my breathing. To think that my heart had quickly gone back to normal when she had decided to turn away from Ricky.

I was far from that now and went back to feeling as though my heart had stopped when she had begun intimidating my person. In any case, that awful stench meant that I could not draw in any air. I tried to open my mouth for one big gasp. It took me back to the time when Candle Face had held me under water in the creek. But I could not draw in air because I could not move any more, not even to open my mouth to gasp.

What had not changed since I had noticed her inside our room was Candle Face’s grimace. It was the same as when she had been ridiculing Ricky as he slept. She leant forward in this position and brought both hands towards my face. I told myself that this was it. I would die and not have to know about anything after this. But her hands stretched across with the thumbs touching and hovered above my neck. She was signaling to me what it meant to lock her hands in this position and squeeze the breath out of me, if I should have any breath left now.

I pleaded for my life now. I looked up and into where her eyes should have been. But Candle Face was shaking her head, swinging her dreadlocks around and signaling ‘no.’ She started laughing her hollow, ghostly and gurgling laugh. Finally, she swung her head all the way round so that her face was facing Ricky. She stayed this way for a minute and brought up what may have been an arm. I thought she was going to strike me, but she stretched the arm back towards Ricky and pointed towards him with one of her claw-like digits.

She brought her face back to me and moved her head up and down in a ‘yes’ as she had the very first night that I had seen her crawl out of her hole. I was past caring now. I wanted either her to go or else I wanted to pass out into oblivion as I had done in the past when I had been confronted by Candle Face. But she was still not done with me. She brought her head low and I thought she was peering at me. She said in her hoarse growly voice, “watch out for him this time.”

I could have laughed. Frank had done away with any enemies Ricky might have. Ricky was in favor with our neighborhood friends because of his newest antics. It was another matter whether I, or any of us, approved of Ricky’s shot-in-the-head or hangman’s noose play acting. I was going to be proved wrong in the worst manner possible. Tonight, Candle Face stayed that way for a long second. Did I catch a glint in her eye, or was it just my imagination?

Candle Face then something else which left me in no doubt as to her own feelings. She said that it was not easy for anyone to decide to become Griffin’s friend. She said that Griffin was the best and that ghosts and people had tried to take advantage of him.

I now knew that Candle Face, a ghoul as she was, could feel jealous. She wanted Griffin to be with her alone. Griffin made few forays into the outside world on his own. Simply put, she wanted Griffin to stay put. She did not want him to come out, be friends and generally spend time with us.

I felt worried for Ricky all over again and sad for Griffin. It explained why I had not seen him lately. Things were going well for Ricky just now, but what if Candle Face put an end to that, as she well could?

Luckily, I could see that she was done. She rose slowly, her eye sockets flashing within. I did not want to look deep inside. I knew what horrors lay there. Candle Face had my head in a jumble. This time I did not want to know what she had to say. I felt I was better off without it. I felt that her warnings were worse than what really took place.

I awoke with a start. It was still early in the morning, the little time before breakfast. I could hear the TV on in the living room. Raymond and Ricky and my favorite program was on. Archie did not have many speech inhibitions. Just now he was saying ‘bang bang’ and I could hear his wife talking in her high pitched voice. There was canned laughter filtering through the walls and Archie may have been doing his amusing stunt. I did not want to know. I was waiting for my brain to clear from last night’s ritual.

I looked across at Ricky. His eyes were open and he was looking straight at me but did not say anything. The TV was making the right noises but he did not do the handgun stunt. The TV was never on this early in the morning, but a new day had dawned and our bedroom was flooded in light. We wondered what the explanation for that could be.

We quietly waited for Mom to come in. She would not have to rouse us from sleep today, but I was aching for my mother after that session with Candle Face. Even Candle Face could feel emotional about her own, I had been made to realize.

**Chapter 26**

Mom had noticed Ricky’s inclination towards miming gun play and hangman’ s noose. Shelia had been quiet about it, but had registered her displeasure quietly. Shelia had ignored most things to do with us except household chores. Shelia’s reaction seemed to strike a chord with Ricky. Mom had noticed, and had said that she had noticed Ricky’s goings-ons.

He was going to try and hold on to Shelia’s attention. I think that in reality, Ricky just wanted to be noticed by everyone in our family, especially our parents. There had been the time when he had joined our older brothers when they had played drinking games and smoked stuff that was not good for them. He had ended up getting very sick. Ricky had not tried anything like that again, but I had a feeling that his hankering for attention had not gone away.

Ricky had been trying to copy some of Dennis and Frank’s antics but I felt that he could not pull off these tricks as well as our older brothers. For example, he would draw our parents’ attention to something in a corner of the room during dinner. While they were looking there, he would drop something or clap loudly near their ear so that they jumped. It was always greeted without the humor he expected. Ricky ended up grudging Dennis and Frank their successfully conducted mean jokes and tricks.

Dennis and Frank, for their part, told Ricky not to worry. They told him that he would never be as good as them. They were of course being sarcastic. Ricky looked downcast.

Then there was me. I know that he thought that Raymond and Shelia favored me because I was the youngest in the family. He had told me as much time and time again. I thought that this idea of his may be changing for the better. He no longer hit and punched and threatened me with worse if I told on him. I was not sure whether he was less jealous of what he thought was undue parental attention, or whether it was because he had become introverted and was mulling over other stuff in his life. His new found invisible friend had given him a lot to think about.

That was where the problem lay, now. I knew that Candle Face was jealous of the friendship between Griffin and Ricky. I hoped that she would be able to reason this out for herself. I hoped she would not want to damage Ricky in any way. She had done what was best for Griffin up until now and I hoped that she would wake up to the fact that any such move on her part would be damaging for Griffin.

So much for my fledgling attempts at psychological analysis. In the meanwhile, I could only observe and hope.

Ricky was seeking something. Now that I am better able to truly analyse what was going on, I think he was looking for his missing friend. I could see that Ricky had ultimately decided not to spend a great deal of time in our room on his own. He had wandered out absentmindedly at first, but now took to regularly joining Raymond and me on the couch in front of the TV. I was not sure how good it had been for him – that business of miming the shot in the head as Archie did.

During all this, Ricky was possibly looking for Griffin. There were other things he was doing which we did not understand then.

Ricky had stripped our tree house down to its bare board. All of us were devastated when he did this. It seemed to signal that there would be less of his shows. Today I think that it was part of his effort to look for Griffin.

As for the two back lots – our own and the one next door, our friends Nick and Eric, Robert and Michael and Michael’s little brother Sylvester had been coming around to play very occasionally now. They did however hope that Ricky would think up an extempore entertainment for all of us, as he used to in the old days, when the tree house was still intact and had not been dismantled.

But Ricky seemed to have his mind on other stuff and had not obliged except for imitating the shot-in-the-head and playing dead at the end of a pretend noose. Our friends were playing less of our childhood type games, and it was now a rare occasion when all of us would get together.

It was one such rare occasion, or nearly so. All of us were there in our back lot of Number 304 Ben Howell Drive except for Robert who lived literally catty corner. Robert’s parents had made their displeasure known about my family, especially the four of us brothers. They frowned at us and frowned at their son if he came over. He was generally stressed about what his mother wanted for him, and what he wanted for himself and with us. Robert was not there today. We could only guess at what could have happened.

We missed Robert, particularly Ricky because he liked to think of Robert as his best friend. Still, my spirits were high. My friends had been congratulating me about the city-wide track meet held recently at which I had won first place. I could afford to be real proud of this because I had run the mile with other boys and not just those from school. I had actually beaten the other boy who had come second, by more than a minute and a half. I had done the mile in 5.35 minutes, though my red Budweiser cap had flown off in the course of my effort. It had been worth it for me and for Raymond, who had insisted that I take part in the track event. He had even run alongside but outside the track to encourage me. His encouragement had worked.

We had brought our bicycles on to the empty lot next door and played bicycle hop after what seemed like ages. I could ignore the horror who lived in the hole for the time being. We were exhilarated after performing acrobatics on our bicycles. As we used to do earlier, we would pedal down Ben Howell Drive, point our bicycle wheels in the air, and come down to balance on the ramp before we hopped off the seat of the bicycle and on to the grass in a practiced sequence. I enjoyed it greatly and raced my cycle down the street before my jump with extra energy. I suppose winning the mile had done wonders for my confidence. I thought that my bicycle jump in the air was higher than the others. I was on top of the world.

After that game everyone, I included, had clambered on to the board across the lower branches of our great tree. We made a huge racket, and had Virginia come out to admonish us. We and our mindlessness had driven her back home and we now turned to Ricky.

We asked Ricky to do something. Ricky had at first shown that he could not be bothered, but had relented when Sylvester asked. I promised to assist him, as I used to, in the old days with his magic tricks. Sylvester asked to be allowed to be Ricky’s assistant too. Ricky came out of his far-away look and looked at me for a long while. I knew that I was going to be the lucky helper.

Everyone was clambering off, getting down on the wild grass covered ground and looking for the most comfortable seating arrangement, away from fire ants and away from the round depression in the ground in the far back. I came down to stand just below Ricky’s stage.

Ricky carried on looking at me but I could not read his expression. Should I feel as happy as I was, I thought to myself. Ricky announced the fact of my first place in running the mile. But my friends knew about this. He asked me to show how I had run. I demurred, but he reminded me that now I was his helper. I ran around the perimeter of our house and the empty lot. I passed the hole in the ground and looked in, to make sure that I was safe. I heard a jeering laugh and an encouraging chirrup, I thought.

This done, Ricky seemed to want to get down to more forfeits for me. I had to run up and down our street. I was feeling a bit silly. Our friends clapped every time I came back to starting point below the board in the tree, but their cheering was tending to trail off. Now Ricky asked me to go fetch the medal I had got for finishing the track race in first place. I demurred again. I felt that I was being made a spectacle of. I felt that I was being put through punishing hoops learnt from his drinking games with Dennis and Frank. But Ricky would not budge.

He said that I had chosen myself as his helper this afternoon. Sylvester looked happy that it had not been him. I had no option but to go into the house and into our room. I had slung the medal on its ribbon high up on the wall. I now had to bring it down and take it outside. Ricky reached out, plucked it from my hand, pulled his arm back and lobbed it high in the air. My medal flew up, followed an arc and landed in the hole in the back of the empty lot next door.

My friends had started cheering when they saw me come out of the house with my prize in my hand. But when Ricky threw it in the hole they were speechless, as was I.

I think I cried a bit, 11 year old baby that I was. Ricky was exultant. He was now daring me to go fetch my prize from where it was hidden. The thought drove me into a frenzy not dissimilar to what I had to face when Candle Face came around at night. I was scared, to say the least, not wanting to go close to . My friends came around and sat around me. Michael sat next to me and his brother Sylvester sat on the other side. As with earlier confrontations between Ricky and me, they did not want to take sides and melted away after some time. They would have had to go home in any case.

No one had dared to offer to retrieve the medal from where it now lay. All of us had always avoided that accursed hole in the back lot next door, even before we had discussed the rumors. It had always given my friends a bad feeling. I had foolishly ventured there and so had Anthony. Both of us regretted that action. Some of my tears, I knew, were because Ricky had played one of his new found, extempore tricks and he had played it on me.

Ricky was now trying his hand at tricks in the same way as Archie on TV and also Dennis and Frank in real life with their unkind jokes. I thought again that it was because he wanted attention from the family, and maybe from our mother in particular. Archie’s antics played by Ricky had got Ricky plenty of attention from our neighborhood boys. I could have told Ricky that he was not so good at playing jokes and tricks on others. I could have, and our friends could have told him that he was an entertainer and this was what he was best at. I could see that what he had done to me was an example of this. It also signaled the fact that he still thought that I was after all, a baby who was favored by the adults and had to be got at.

I knew I could not tell Raymond. Raymond would probably punish Ricky and go and get my medal back. It would reinforce Ricky’s belief that Raymond favored me and would do anything to get me to stop crying. I could do nothing. I was worried of what he would think up next. But the next time Ricky played a joke, it was on Mom and it got him into plenty of trouble.

A year-round Halloween and party shop had opened next to the H.E.B grocery store. It had costumes and false moustaches, tricks and masks on display. It also had ‘how to’ books. Ricky thought the books were ace.

Best of all, the party shop was not just for Halloween and parties. Their tricks, including magic tricks were a lot more sophisticated compared to the simpler fare we had known till then. It had some props for children who wanted to entertain others, but Ricky had managed till now with his own homemade ones when he put on a show. All of us crowded in to marvel at what the shop had to sell. Ricky knew what he wanted. He read a bit from one of the books. He bought some fake blood.

Ricky hung around outside on the front porch late one night after dinner. I had hung around with him when he had made his purchase at the shop and knew what he was up to. He secretly burst a sachet of a liquid that looked like blood and smeared it over one of his arms. I was curious about how he was going to show and explain this.

He walked up to the living room door from the front porch. When he came up to the screen door he seemed to be holding his right arm and for all appearances it was completely covered with (fake) blood. At the instant that he managed to push open the door and stagger in, Ricky was in his elements as an actor. But this was just something that only I could reflect upon.

I also reckoned that it was one of his best performances when he told our mother in a choked voice that he had just accidentally cut open his arm. Shelia was aghast. She may not have an immediate solution in mind, but she immediately jumped up and ran to Ricky.

“Oh my God!” She said. I could see the terror in my mother’s face. She put her arm around him and held him. Her face was pale. She looked terribly shocked. Her knees buckled. We thought she was going to faint. At this point Ricky knew he had made a huge mistake. He had not thought that she would take his word for it without any questions asked. Or that she would react in this extreme fashion. But she had, and did not remotely imagine that it could be just a trick.

Ricky knew that he had to do something quickly. He had to tell our mother that he was only playing a joke on her. He had to give our mother an explanation of what he had meant to do. He did not want her to see things in the way she believed to be true.

He said as soon as he had got his courage back, “It’s not real Ma. It’s fake blood. I’m OK.” Ricky then smeared the fake blood on his other arm to show that there really wasn’t a cut underneath all the blood. He explained to her that it was not blood at all. Shelia was taking time to come out of shock and he was trying very hard to extricate himself from this trick which had gone all wrong.

She looked at his arm and then Ricky’s face. Ricky was scared too, and sorry as well. I could tell that Ricky was really sorry for what he had just done. I wished he could be as sorry for what he had done to me. I wished he would go and get my medal back. Just now, he knew that he had not meant to worry our mother in this way.

Smack! Shelia had recovered herself and slapped Ricky across his face much harder than I had ever known her to. The sound echoed through the house. Ricky’s cheeks were aflame. She grabbed both his shoulders and shook him. She told him to never do that or anything close to that stupid trick, ever again. Ricky kept apologizing and saying that he had not meant to scare her that much. Raymond did not say anything but he did give Ricky a long look and told him that he needed to be set right.

Mom had not recovered in a way. It was not only the hardest smack she had ever given to any of us, she was now plain angry. She threatened Ricky with everything she could think of. Ricky was not going to get any pocket money if he wasted it on such silly things as fake blood. He was going to be grounded for a long, long time. She told him to go clean up, have a bath and go to bed.

After Ricky had gone off, our mother sat back down and cried. Later still that night, when Ricky had got into bed and covered himself with his sheet, I thought I heard muffled sobs.

Ricky had realized, too late, the gravity of his silly trick. He may have also realized that forcing me to make a spectacle in front of our friends was not a good thing. It was another one of his jokes that no one found funny. But mainly, he should have come to know that Shelia would take an awfully long time to forgive him for that trick he had tried to play on her. It struck him that she might never forgive him.

Ricky was subdued the whole of that week. There were no visits to the party shop, no performances, no more attempted tricks on any of us in the family, nothing.

A couple of days later I awoke for school at the usual time. There was something hanging high up on the wall when I opened my eyes. I shut my eyes for a couple of seconds and when I opened them I could see that it was my medal hanging at the end of its ribbon. It was back on its nail. The only problem was, that it was not as clean and shiny as it had been when Ricky had forced me to hand it over to him. It was now encrusted in some drippy stuff. I hoped that that was only fake blood.

**Chapter 27**

I remember it as being a week during which Ricky had been exceptionally quiet. He kept to himself, talking little to me, our brothers and our parents. He managed this by avoiding all of us. When he was at home Ricky stayed in his room.

The little that Ricky and I had talked, and a longer discussion he had with Eric had made me realize that there was something Ricky wanted very badly. He knew that he would have to ask our mother for permission for this. Ricky had become-inward looking. He thought that he was self sufficient, but he knew he would somehow have to ask Shelia for the favor. He would have to come out of his shell.

Towards the end of that week, on a Friday night, Ricky got up the courage to come and sit with us in the living room as he used to. Raymond and Shelia, me and Ricky were sitting there with the three TV viewers on the couch in front of the TV. Ricky was looking a little nervously at our mother. Raymond was looking at Ricky as though he had a question to ask, but Mom was reading a magazine and ignoring these meaningful looks around her.

Ricky had decided to ask our mother an important question, but was taking time to find his voice. So he sat there not talking, but looking at Shelia in a pleading manner. Ricky finally got his nerve up. He told Mom that his friends in the neighborhood and at school regularly went to the movies over weekends. He said that he would like to go too and asked for permission to go to the movies with Eric, who was going with his family the next day which was a Saturday. Ricky asked for the money for his ticket.

Shelia pointed out that Eric’s family were rolling in money. They had one of the best houses on our street, other than Robert. She reminded Ricky that we were not as well off, despite how hard Raymond and she had to work to manage everything and put food on the table for the family. She reminded Ricky that he his pocket money had been cut off and that he had been grounded for a month, thanks to his silly trick.

Shelia said that she could not find the money to pay for Ricky’ ticket, so he could not go.

But once Ricky had got his nerve up, he was not going to let go. He put his best arguments to use. Ricky said that he had promised not to play a trick like that on her again. He was going to stay away from the party shop. In any case, he was not going to get any more fake body stuff. Ricky said that he was truly sorry and that she must know this. Ricky told Shelia that she must know for sure that he had turned over a new leaf. He was not going to play any more tricks, that our mother had his word for it.

Ricky said that as badly off as we were, she might be able to afford the cash for one tiny movie ticket for him. He kept pestering her to give him the little money he needed for the movies. Our mother seemed to have turned a deaf ear. She said ‘no’ every time Ricky asked. She would not budge.

Ricky had more to his plea. He told Shelia that he was willing to work for the money. He was willing to work hard, whether at home or in a proper job, though he was still not yet thirteen.

Shelia said she expected him to help with the housework as always. Again, Shelia said that she did not have any money to give to Ricky. He asked Shelia for permission to wash neighbor’s cars to make up the money. Shelia knew he was desperate to go to the movies with his friend. But as far as she was concerned, Ricky was still grounded and would have to last his punishment. She again said “no.”

Ricky had understood that Shelia would never agree to giving him the money or letting him earn it when he was grounded. But it was the last word as far as Ricky was concerned. He was not going to let go. He and Eric mulled over Shelia’s arguments and came up with a plan, though it would have to be a secret plan. Ricky’s idea of washing cars was a good one. Ricky did not *have* to ask our mother for permission they now decided. It would be paid work for Ricky.

Ricky and Eric discussed how they were going to work it out. They decided that paid work was outside the fact of Ricky being grounded. They convinced themselves. I could only agree with their clever thinking. I was so taken up with the idea that I hung around. They decided that both of them would wash neighbors’ cars to make some money. They would keep it a secret from our parents.

They waited till Saturday morning, when Raymond and then Shelia went off to work. Eric and Ricky, in particular, made sure that the coast was clear. It was finally safe for Ricky to venture out. It was Saturday morning when our parents were definitely at work, Ricky and Eric walked up and down Ben Howell Drive. They asked all our neighbors if they wanted to have their cars washed for a few bucks. Most of them were very glad to have this service at their doorstep. Everyone who was at home said “yes” to having their cars washed.

Ricky made me do his household chores that Saturday. That meant that I did double chores – the ones our mother had asked me to do, and the ones she had listed out for him. Ricky made me do my homework for the weekend. He considered whether I should do his homework, then thought better of it.

I obliged happily because besides being part of Ricky’s money raising scheme, Ricky had after all returned my medal for coming first in the mile race. I had second thoughts about who had actually done me this last favor, because I had not actually seen Ricky return the medal. Maybe he had persuaded someone else – Griffin maybe, to fish it out of that forbidden place and put it back in its place. I did not give any thought to the fact that he might have asked that other being to bring it back.

So I did what was expected of me and Ricky did what he expected of himself to earn his ticket money. When I came out on the front porch I was convinced that the parked cars on Ben Howell Drive somehow looked newer and brighter. A walk convinced me that Eric and Ricky had put in their very best effort to wash cars.

Eric and Ricky had better news still. They had washed and polished enough cars to cover Ricky’s ticket money. He could now pay for his way in to watch that movie. Ricky had managed matters, somehow. He could tell himself that he was successful.

Eric and Ricky had in the meanwhile thought up the second part of their plan to get Ricky into the movie hall. When our mother got home from work, Ricky told her that he was after all going to the movies. After what she had told him last time, Shelia was in no mood for him to start an argument again. But Ricky calmed her, saying that Eric was going to pay for Ricky to go with him to the movie. Shelia questioned him closely about why Eric should do him such a big favor. But Ricky managed to convince her.

She could no longer say “no.” Our mother was forced to finally said “yes.” Ricky was thrilled that he had got around her. He was going to see a movie with Eric and his family, something that he had set his heart on.

 Ricky went off to wash and get the best of our shared clothes out of the closet. He took care with how he dressed and how he looked. This was going to be Ricky’s first outing to the movies with a family. The ‘phone rang and I rushed to pick it up.

I had been terribly keyed up about the whole money raising scheme so that Ricky could go to the movies. I knew I would be on edge till Ricky went safely off with Eric and his family. It was just one of those days when Raymond playfully beat me to the telephone. I heard him talking to a neighbor and saw his expression change from laughing to serious. I will say this for Raymond, that he did not give anything away.

Unfortunately, it was one of our neighbors who was calling. He thought he was being a good neighbor. He thought that he was paying one of us a compliment. He thought that Ricky should be given some appreciation. He told Raymond that Ricky and Eric had done really well in one day, or in half a day’s work. He told Raymond how the two had surprised everyone by asking and then washing their cars on a Saturday. He told Raymond what a good job Ricky had done of washing his car.

Our father let on to Shelia what Ricky had been up to. Needless to say, Shelia thought that she knew that Ricky would be up to his tricks. She thought that she could tell that he could not be trusted. Raymond and Shelia were not pleased. Our mother looked shocked, as he had done d when Ricky had tried to trick her with his bloodied arm. She was really angry with him and she was angry with him and in the same way she had been angry on that fateful day.

Shelia did not wait for Ricky to get dressed and emerge from our room. She charged in and strode up to him.

She had decided on her own game to string Ricky along. She knew that she was going to catch him out this time. Her face was aflame when she asked, “So Eric gave you the money for the movie?” She asked.

“Yes.” He replied, but sensed that something was wrong. So he launched into a story about how the money for the ticket had not come directly from Eric but from his parents. Ricky reminded Shelia that she had told him on Friday that Eric’s parents were well off. Ricky told Shelia that Eric’s parents had decided to fund a trip to the movies for Eric and at least one friend as often as they could. He was back to trying to convince Shelia. Ricky was having to tell another lie to top the first. Ricky was hemmed in and probably knew it by now, but our mother was stone faced.

Shelia had enough. She now let the truth drop. “Then how come our neighbor called to tell us you did a good job washing his car?” She said.

He had been caught out and had no way to turn. Ricky had to face up to the worst. He beetroot red. Our mother yelled at him to go to his room and not to come out till dinnertime. I knew this because after that phone call from the neighbor I could not tear myself away. I was being the sneaky younger brother, but was seeing Ricky’s torment through to the bitter end.

Shelia now put Ricky’s effort in the same category as a big lie. She thought it was part of his nasty jokes and tricks. She reminded him that he had promised never to do such things again. Shelia thought that this big lie about how Ricky’s movie ticket was going to be funded was one such trick. Ricky had no one to turn to. Eric would gladly have vouched for Ricky but it would have made things worse between Shelia and Ricky. Ricky stayed home and in his room.

Shelia’s rage would take time to die down. Raymond took a long time to pacify her. He decided to take her out, to calm her down. Later that night, our mother and father went out on one of their rare outings. Ricky and I stayed home. We had no idea where Dennis and Frank were till we heard jangly music wafting down the road from the direction of Eddie’s garage. The music stopped after sometime. Ricky and I tensed, wondering what was going to happen next.

Soon enough we heard our brothers whistling and stomping down Ben Howell Drive. They were coming home. Raymond and Shelia were having dinner out. Ricky had said that he did not want to eat. I did not blame him for losing his appetite after what he had gone through. I had grown hungry but had managed to make do with cornflakes and watered down milk. In the last couple of weeks I no longer wanted to listen to the cereal snapping or crackling or popping.

But now our brothers were coming home and would want a meal. There wasn’t anything at home, not tonight. We wondered what they were going to do and whether we would have to be involved in any way. I had a wild thought of running off. Eric’s house was closest, but would be closed since they had all gone off for their own entertainment at the movies. Ricky, in any case, said that he would stay at home, and hope that Dennis and Frank were not on some kind of a high. He could only hope for the best.

Ricky was in a lot of pain, I knew. He did not care about the physical pain.

Sure enough, Dennis and Frank were going through the kitchen looking for something to eat. There wasn’t anything and their moods were worsening. Raymond and Shelia had taken Raymond’s car for their outing. Dennis and Frank told us that they were going to go to Dunkin Donuts to pick something up. They told us that they were going to take Shelia’s car. Warning bells were going off in our heads but we knew it was better that we stayed out of whatever plan they had.

That night Dennis and Frank tried to rob a Dunkin’ Doughnuts unsuccessfully. Dennis got caught. How did he get caught? He demanded all the money from the till. After he got the money, he asked the cashier for a dozen doughnuts. He actually took his time and chose a dozen doughnuts. He took such care that he gave the police plenty of time to reach him. When Frank heard the sirens approaching, he sped away in the get-a-way car. That was Mom’s car.

What a good brother! Dennis got caught with all the cash and all the doughnuts he had chosen. He was going to spend several years in a juvenile detention facility, but this bit was still in the future, after he had been charged and after his hearing.

Shelia would have to be outraged in a different way to her reaction to Ricky, when she found it was her car they had taken. This time the punishment would not have to be imposed by her.

Ricky and I would not know what Dennis and Frank had been up to on this day. Nor would our parents, till much later. Our family would have some other grieving to do before his foolishness caught up with Dennis.

I had seen Eric drive off to the movies with his parents. Eric was probably feeling miserable, because he had his face pressed against the back window of their car when his father drove off. He looked towards our bedroom off the front porch for as long as he could. Ricky must have heard their car drive off as well, but did not say anything.

If Ricky had been in a quiet mood all week till this Saturday when he had worked hard and had still been denied his due, he was not saying anything at all now. He just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It frightened me, to see Ricky like this. I tried a bit. I asked Ricky to come and watch TV with me. I told him that his car washing had earned him a fair amount and that he had cash of his own, even though he was grounded.

I wished that Griffin would come and be his friend again. That gave me an idea. Ricky still had other friends who cared for him.

I rang up our friends and got them to come over to our house. Robert, Michael and another boy called Scott sat in our living room, chatted and watched TV. None of us wanted to begin any energetic games out of doors. It was beginning to get dark.

Unfortunately, Ricky stayed in our room lying on his back in bed. He had not come out to watch TV with me earlier and he did not come out to join us now. He was not reading anything, nor did he write in his journal, I noticed.

## Chapter 28

Ricky just carried on lying in bed and staring straight up at the ceiling. He had heard Eric drive off to the movies with his parents. Eric knew just how Ricky must have felt. He had his face pressed against the back window of his car when his father drove off, something I saw. He looked towards our bedroom off the front porch for as long as he could. Ricky had also heard our brothers Dennis and Frank, loud as they were. He had heard them discussing their plans to go to Dunkin Donut and heard them drive off in Mom’s car.

Ricky had heard Eric come back as well a couple of hours later. Eric was one of our good friends and Ricky may have guessed that Eric would come over wanting to see him. This was true. Eric did come. He wanted to see how Ricky was doing and he wanted to tell us about the super movie he had just seen.

Ricky had got up from his unmoving, unthinking, catatonic state. I had been wondering if Ricky was going to get up and move from his unmoving state. He was coming into our living room. He felt that Eric might come over after the movie. He was right, because Eric was coming over to the house.

I had several friends over that evening. Robert, Michael, and Scott were all in the living room when Eric came over. Ricky and Eric both entered the living room together – Ricky from our bedroom and Eric through the front door. We were all talking, being noisy and also watching TV. Ricky chose the furthest corner and sat there. Eric joined him. I guess Ricky was not feeling sociable tonight. But we noticed the effort he had made to come and join us. We had wanted Ricky to come and be with us this evening. We thought we might be able to help him feel better.

Eric had some talking to do. He wanted to tell Ricky about his movie. Eric’s father had chosen a family movie about a war. It had been started against the United States by a country far away. It started with unimaginable flying, diving and bombing by war planes from many years ago. Everyone in the movie had booed because the country under onslaught was the United States.

Ricky was sitting up and listening. Here was one story not in his repertoire of stories for others. And Eric was dramatizing details in Ricky’s manner. It showed the people on the ground who were getting bombed. It showed heroes and it showed ships and people who died. Here Eric described the instant deaths. The movie picked up on personal stories of good looking men and women. Some of them would find happiness by the end of the movie, some would die and some would be treated unfairly.

Ricky followed the stories closely. He told Eric that life *was* sometimes unfair. Eric agreed. They were both probably thinking of events closer to home. But Eric was now coming to better parts of the story. Heroic pilots from the U. S. Air force *had* offered awesome airborne resistance. Those were scenes worth watching, though Eric said that his mother had objected to that sort of violence on the screen. Eric told Ricky that if he waited long enough the movie was bound to be shown on TV.

He asked Ricky to keep a watch on TV programs and to let him know. He would love to watch the movie again on TV with Ricky. But this brought Ricky back to the disastrous day and how he had been accused, a little unjustly. Ricky lapsed into one of his quiet moods again.

Someone thought that asking Ricky to do one of Archie’s stunts would involve him some more. Ricky thought about it briefly but did not seem to be really with it. He looked over at Eric. The two of them had been buddies in the whole car washing deal. They were going to stick up for each other. Eric felt a little awkward. I guess he felt partly responsible for the trouble Ricky had got into with our mother. Eric felt that it had been his plan but that Ricky had got caught out, thanks to the neighbor phoning in with his compliments. Shelia had thought that Ricky had lied to her. Eric felt terrible about this and did not say much, though he cared for Ricky and would do anything to get him out of his predicament.

We left them alone as the two of them sat in quiet companionship, wondering what to say or do next. One of us asked Ricky to do one of Archie’s stunts again. This time Ricky got up and walked to the middle of living room. He stood there, looking around. As on the day I had asked to be Ricky’s helper, I had a deep sense of foreboding. I wondered if it had been such a good idea to have so many of our friends’ group come over.

Despite my apprehension Ricky had taken up the bait and was starting with Archie’s rope stunt. Ricky was tossing an imaginary lasso. He twirled it for a few minutes above his head, then made as though he had got his head through it. He sat down with the imaginary end in his hand, pulling to tighten the noose. He made out that he was tightening the rope and that his breathing was obstructed. He was miming the rope effect and we thought it was terrifically realistic. It came to a stage when Ricky’s head fell forward. His eyes were closed and he looked like he was no longer breathing. Michael, Scott and I were animated. Robert and Eric were not. Eric got up and gently removed the imaginary rope from Ricky’s neck. Ricky stayed as he was with his head slumped forward.

We did not know what to think. I acted first. I went up to Ricky and shook him and clapped at the same time. Ricky seemed to come back from wherever he had gone to. His consciousness flooded back and I was glad to see that the same old Ricky had come back to us. I felt like clapping some more. Ricky sat there with a knowing expression on his face. We went back to playing our indoor games and commenting on whatever was on TV.

But there was more action on tonight. We were horsing around, trying out Archie’s shooting and rope hanging stunts ourselves. Scott was an enthusiastic member, but he had not had the opportunity to view Ricky’s brand of entertainment before today. Scott had heard about Ricky’s level of better than the best performance and seen a miniature show today. He went up to Ricky and asked him to do some more of his stunts.

Ricky smiled at Scott. He smiled at all of us and then walked up to the telephone and picked it up. Ricky found himself a spot on the floor, sat down and placed the telephone next to him. He then pulled the telephone cord towards him until the slack was completely gone. This took some of Ricky’s time. He did not say a word while he had been dealing with the telephone. We were waiting with bated breath for his next move. We all wondered what he was going to do with the cord.

My sense of panicky foreboding returned when Ricky pulled the telephone cord still tighter to a point above his head. He now began to wrap the cord tightly around his neck. He kept on at it till the cord was so tight and the cord around his neck so tightly wound that the cord popped out of the wall. We had been waiting all this time, thinking that this was another of Ricky’s performer’s tricks and that all would be revealed at some point, as he did with his magic tricks. But Ricky hung on to the end of the telephone cord which had sprung out of the wall and pulled it towards his foot. He wrapped that end around his big toe and actually pushed that foot as he pulled his back backwards. The many layers of the cord wrapped around Ricky’s neck tightened and I could see the skin of his neck pucker.

All of us were shocked but I think I was the only one close to being scared. Ricky’s ability to entertain was legion. Our friends would greatly exaggerate when they talked about his magic tricks and general ability as a performer. The boys at school and in our church who had heard about Ricky thought about him as someone close to Superboy. So our friends who were watching Ricky now were still relating all this to his abilities and thought this was just another one of Ricky’s impresario acts. I knew it was not one from his repertory of magic.

But now the cord had become so tight that it sank into his skin. It was not just puckered skin I was looking at. The telephone cord had sunk so deep that I could no longer see it. The blood must have rushed to his head because Ricky’s face turned red, redder than the time our mother had smacked him. I could see Ricky’s blood vessels bulging right out of his skin.

I realized first, then the others, that this was not one of his tricks. Ricky was seriously trying to hurt himself. We noticed other details. Ricky’s hands had become limp. We may have frozen for a couple of seconds, but I, and then the rest of us jumped up and surrounded him. We left the rest of him alone but made sure that we unwrapped the cord around his neck.

Eric was visibly upset. All of us were shocked, but not as badly as Ricky. Ricky just lay there with his eyes open. He was motionless. All that I could think about was that he had been in this position on his bed in our bedroom just a little while ago.

All this had taken up some 30 seconds. After another half a minute or maybe a minute, Ricky’s eyes started to blink. We could now afford to be scared. Some of us wanted to get as far away from this spectacle as we could. It was time to go home for our friends. I knew that Eric wanted to stay on with Ricky and me but he had rules in his house and he just had to leave as well.

After another couple of minutes there was a commotion outside. Frank had come home, driving rough and in a hurry. The tyres of Shelia’s little car screeched to a halt as Frank hurried to put the car back where it belonged. He came in and took a long look at Ricky who was just lying there on the floor. Ricky did not react to Frank’s noisy entry and Frank ran into his room and banged the door shut. I vaguely wondered why Dennis had not come home with him. None of us except for Frank and Dennis were aware of their attempted cash and donut heist at Dunkin Donuts.

I stayed right there next to Ricky to make sure he didn’t try the stunt with the telephone cord again. All of us went to bed hungry that night, though I thought that it was only Ricky at the time. I was the only one who had managed to snack on cereal earlier.

Our parents came home in another half an hour. They looked at the two of us in the living room – Ricky still on the floor and me hunched next to him, the telephone back in its place. Mom was unaware of the drama that had taken place. She did not know about the telephone since it was back where it belonged. Mom ignored us. She probably thought that the two of us were up to another attention-getting scenario. Raymond sat down to watch TV before going to bed. I helped Ricky up and the two of us went off as well. All Ricky managed to do was to flop down in his own bed and carry on not moving and staring at the ceiling.

If I was trying to help Ricky with his problems, I was feeling totally inadequate. I had a small opportunity to talk to Raymond and Shelia separately tonight and things were not getting better in a hurry. I went to Raymond first, as he watched TV in the living room and relaxed before he retired. I was not going to be able to help my stutter, I knew. “Rr-r-aymond, d-d-do y-y-you think you could t-t-talk to M-m-Mom and she could l-l-let Ricky g-g-go to the movie n-n-n-next weekend? Y-y-you know h-h-he d-d-didn’t m-m-mean that jazz about his arm. A-a-a-nd there’s a special m-m-movie on next weekend.

But it was the end of the day and Raymond was tired. He told me that he did not want to contradict Shelia. She had made up her mind in this case. She had made the rules and Ricky would just have to stick to them. It was too bad that Ricky had lied to Shelia about how he had come by the money for the ticket. Raymond said that Shelia was his wife and he respected her rules and regulations for the family, as should we, her sons.

I would have liked to tell Raymond about our older brothers, but held my peace. As it was, he and Shelia were going to find out about their escapade at Dunkin Donuts soon enough. It would be the local police who would have to tell them. It would put Ricky’s misdemeanor to shame, but by then it would be too late. I realize now that what I should have told Raymond was that Ricky had done nothing wrong to be handed out such a huge punishment. And that it was telling on himself on lots of ways which they, our parents, could not know about. I should have told him that Ricky had tried to hurt himself badly tonight and in front of his friends. That I knew that it could only be a cry for help.

I tried to go to our parents’ bedroom to talk to Shelia. But she had changed for the night and gone to bed. Shelia was tired as well. Our parents worked hard and had deserved their outing tonight. If Ricky had put up a signal that all was not well with him, they were not aware of it just then.

I went to bed with a heavy heart that night. Ricky was still and encased in his sheet. He was ready to sleep. I did not know if he had shut his eyes or was staring at the top of his sheet.

## Chapter 29

Ricky was covered from head to toe in his usual sleeping position, awake or not. I still did not like it when he went to bed first and left me to switch off the light and then get to bed. I could sense a little bit of what Ricky had been through and could spare him tonight.

I would have to eventually go to bed. I got ready with my usual elaborate arrangements. To begin with, I could do without Candle Face, especially tonight. I had still not thought about her warning about Ricky’s safety last time. Nor did I want to start thinking about the events of tonight. I would have time enough for such contemplation during the long hours after I went to bed.

Now, I would do a thorough check before I did that. I remembered the time she had stolen out of our closet. I first managed take a good look in there, moving the clothes around a bit, my hand and fingers trembling, to take another good look. The thought of suddenly uncovering her made my flesh crawl. I was finally sure that Candle Face was not in there but checked the top of the closet before I closed the door. I propped toys against the outside of the closet door. If she was going to try and get in after I’d gone to bed, the toys should fall and make a noise which could warn me. I was actually pleased that I had thought of this.

I checked under Ricky’s bed and mine, again removing dirty clothes from where we had chucked them. I was nervous and showed it when my hands and fingers trembled during this task as well. Candle Face had hidden under Ricky’s bed once. I had to be aware of all the places she could think of. I was on to the next possible danger now.

I would have to switch off the light before I got into bed and hoped that the dark would not get me before Candle Face did. I mapped my path to the light switch and then to bed. I should have had enough practice by now, but the route was still full of uncertainties and terrors.

Practice meant that as before, I pretended tonight to turn the light off. In the next instant I had to run towards my bed and jump several feet before I landed on that base. As before, I landed with a crash which might or might not have disturbed Ricky and anyone else in the house. I was still a little jumpy, but decided to get on to the final. I planned to carry on with my arrangements for sleep only after this and was thinking about how I had probably learnt that business of wrapping the sheet tightly around me from Ricky.

I managed the practice landing alright. When I was convinced I could make it to my bed safely, I turned off my light and ran for my bed. The light rays from the street light were a miniature beacon. It was not really that dark because the outside light showed my way to my bed.

I was about to manage the real landing. I jumped up in the air several feet from the bed with my mind half on my cycling feat. I was again confident and on top of the world. I was in mid-air when I noticed something under my sheets. Before I could reach my bed the sheets moved to the side exposing what lay underneath. It was Candle Face under the sheets. I landed right next to her but managed to bounce up, ready to run. But she had quickly grabbed me. As had happened in the past, I could not move.

I stayed there, terrified and paralyzed and blaming myself. If I had taken all sorts of elaborate precautions, how had she emerged in my own bed? Should I have checked better? I had hidden our best belt under my pillow, away from Ricky should he look for it in the closet tomorrow morning. I had even thought of putting my toys against the cupboard door. Why could I not think of putting toys in my bed which could fall off with a clatter and alert me to the presence of something or someone else?

She was reading my mind and smiling about this train of thoughts. She patted my head and tried to make a noise which went “tch, tch.” She found use for that hated grating voice. “I have something for you.” She said. Whatever it was, I didn’t want it. I told myself that I had not wanted her and now I did not want this. Whatever it was could only bode evil. She had even found my hiding place for her offering. She had reached under my pillow and was pulling something out.

She pulled out something that belonged to me. I know that Ricky and I were supposed to share our clothes and things. Though I was younger but taller than him, our clothes could roughly be said to be the same size. I was not sure who could claim this belt. It was our belt.

She spoke again, “Here it is.” Her clawed hand reached towards my head. I held my breath. In any case, the stench was as bad. No memory could ever prepare me for what flooded my nose and lungs. But those claws were reaching under my head ruffling my hair, in the gap between my head and my pillow. She was actually lifting my head up. Why?

She was slipping the narrow end of the belt under my head, working it down under my neck and bringing it back in a loop. She had clean lifted my head and looped the belt around my neck. Ricky can you help me, I thought. But I had not been able to help him earlier. I had not stopped him as soon as he had begun to twist the telephone wire around his neck. And he could not help me now when Candle Face was doing something similar with our belt.

Even if he could talk to me from under his shroud, as he had done last time this same scene had been enacted, I would have been glad for it unlike last time. Anything, Ricky, I pleaded wordlessly. Even if it was to scold me about who should turn off the light. But Ricky must have gone to sleep. As during any of Candle Face’s nocturnal visits, I tried to yell out for help but I couldn’t. And as during such sessions, she took advantage of my paralyzed state. She pulled on the pointy bit of the leather belt. She looped it around my neck once more and began to tighten the belt around my neck.

I had been trying very hard not to breathe because of her smell. But now she was doing it for me. She was trying to get me to stop breathing. Her reason was different. I had to die. I had still not been able to fathom what she wanted from me, other than my terrified state. Did I have to die because I had not considered that? Some reason lazily stirred in my mind.

But she was on to what she knew, and I did not. I had not been aware that she knew when Ricky had been inflicting that punishment on himself. But she was telling me now, and she was mocking me in the bargain, as was her tendency. Her smokers’ voice spat out the words. “Oh, you like it too? Ricky loves this, it’s his favorite.” I could feel my pulse beating in my temples. My breathing was labored. I was no longer trying not to draw in breath. My breathing had begun to make a swizzing sound.

Another horrible thought flooded what consciousness I had left. Had Candle Face somehow brought on Ricky’s actions? My mind thought desperately back to the scene from an hour or two ago. Scott had asked Ricky to do a stunt and Ricky, though despondent, had smiled back at him and at us. And then he had done that with the pretend rope. The next one had been far more extreme. It could have only be a punishment for him, the worst possible at that. Now that Candle Face was conveying all this to me through her brand of sarcasm, I stopped to think whether it had been Ricky punishing himself or someone else. Could Candle Face have…?

Each new thought was even more devastating than the last. And if it had been Candle Face, where had Ricky’s invisible friend been? I knew that Candle Face cared for Griffin and Griffin for her. But did she control Griffin? Could she turn her brother against mine?

Candle Face had found use for her voice again. She knew by now how deeply her revelations were affecting me. “Oh, you do like it. Let me make it tighter for you.” She said. I knew by now that her long-ago threats had become stronger with the passage of time. I knew that I would have to watch not just my back, but my very existence. She wanted my life. She could actually kill. She had killed before and could do it again. Plain torment was now *passé* for her. She wanted more.

My mind raced now. How had I been able to evade her clutches earlier? Memory came flooding back. Candle Face had grown bored when I had given up. But she probably read my thoughts. She was furious now. She would not allow me to do what I thought was my only way out.

The real leather noose was tight around my neck. I could not move, least of all talk, never mind the paralysis her presence brought on. Candle Face was determined not to be outdone of what she thought was her due and her right. I had thought too hard and she was going to put an end to that. She lifted her head, turned her face in my direction and blew that stinky breath of hers straight towards me. What now?

Her ghoulish face was in my face. I could see the wretched, rotten horrors that dwelt deep in her eye sockets and in her mouth. I tried to will myself to close my eyes, but could not. A maggot like tongue began to worm itself in and out of her mouth. The glowing maggots in her sockets squirmed and worked themselves outwards, towards those windows of her soul, that is if she had one.

I was petrified. I was ready for death. But at this point I could hear laughter and it was coming from the next room. It sounded like my parents were sharing a good laugh. I knew that Raymond had stayed up to watch TV. Shelia must have changed her mind about going to bed. She must have joined him because what I was listening to was laughter from both of them.

Candle Face heard it too and may have thought about how to use this in her cat and mouse game. She was looking at me, that wriggly maggot of a tongue working its way in and out. Her hated voice had found something more to say directly to me. She said, “They’re laughing at you.” I could sense my eyes rolling over to the back of my head.

The last thing I remember thinking was that if she knew so much about Ricky’s actions with the telephone cord, this may well be true. One of the other thoughts I had as I passed into nothingness was that Ricky would be wrong in that case. My parents were laughing at me. I was not favored at all. Unlike what Ricky thought, being considered the baby of the family would not get me any advantages.

Now my mother’s voice was closer still. She was no longer laughing. She was talking sternly in the way she had. She was not in the next room but in ours. She was telling us to get up and get ready for school. Daylight had broken. I could feel something around my neck, but it was not pressing the breath out of my chest. I sat up with a start and felt for whatever it was. It was our leather belt. It was the belt which Candle Face had used to torture me with last night, except that right now it was loosely wrapped around my neck.

I remembered in a flash all that had happened yesterday. I looked across at Ricky. For once, he had not got out of bed before I had. He was awake and lying in bed. I could see the bruises around his neck. They were the marks left by the telephone wire where he had wound it tightly around his neck. The marks were real enough. He saw me staring and I had to look away.

But Ricky wanted to say something now. He rubbed his neck around the blue wire marks and said, “It still hurts.” I wanted to call our mother back, show her the marks and get her involved. I wanted her to let Ricky go to the movies next time, with money he had earned for himself. I wanted to tell her that Ricky had not lied to her.

I went out. Shelia was putting the cereal and milk on the breakfast time and getting ready to rush out.

## Chapter 30

It was the morning after that day. It was 05 May 1985, Ricky and I had woken up without our mother having got us up. The silence was deafening and the house was empty. We wandered out in our pyjamas and figured that it had to be some kind of holiday. We were not expected to have our breakfast and go to school. We figured this because we could see a note from our mother on the dining table. She had left a list of chores for us to do before our parents got home.

On my list there was dish washing and other odds and ends around the house. Ricky or I normally helped our mother to wash the dishes at night. But Shelia had said that she was tired and would leave the dishes till morning. What with their outing and staying up late the night before, I did not blame her. Nor had Ricky or I felt like volunteering ourselves last night to do the dishes.

I took a good look at Shelia’s note. She had two columns down. One for what I had to do and the other for Ricky’s tasks. He, on the other hand, had to clean the back porch. Shelia had specified that he should sweep and swab the wooden floor of the porch. I could see that Ricky’s household chore was a lot more than mine.

We plodded through our usual breakfast and switched on the TV. There was no one now to tell us what not to do. We weren’t really slacking off, I told myself. I was sure that we would get down to the chores in a bit. Ricky and I settled down to watch TV but could not bring ourselves to chat. We had not spoken a single word to each other since we had woken up.

After about an hour, Ricky got up and headed towards the back. I continued to watch TV. I know that I was being lazy. I could hear the swish of the broom as Ricky swept the back porch clean. I could hear him clattering around with the electric floor washer. He was doing quite a thorough job, I could sense. He was still trying to get our mother to appreciate what he could do for her. It was not fair. I wondered whether Shelia would take Ricky’s task in her stride. I told myself that I must have that chat tonight. I heard Ricky pottering around the porch for about half an hour or more.

I thought about going back there and helping him because his chore was a lot harder than mine. It was bound to take longer, as well. I alternated between going out to help him and feeling guilty. If only I had been able to get our mother to see that she had not been fair to Ricky! And now this….her insistence that he prove himself doubly more than me.

I wondered briefly what would have happened if I had risked covering up about washing a couple of cars on our street. Or if it had been Dennis or Frank? I was sure that Shelia would have ignored Dennis and Frank.

In the end, I did not go out to the back porch to help Ricky. Mom had given him that chore and I did not want her to think that my helping Ricky was like the car washing stunt or another kind of cover up.

The rumbling sound of the electric floor washer stopped. I paid no attention because I figured Ricky was taking a break.

But after another twenty minutes I heard a high continuous screaming from one of our women neighbors. When I look back on it, it must have been either Virginia or the woman in the house on the other side of the empty lot from ours. I looked outside but I could not see anything amiss. I sat back down to let it pass. People screaming was not unusual in my neighborhood.

Now someone was screaming louder. It would not go away. It was so bad that it was impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman who was screaming. It became more persistent and louder. Whoever was screaming was coming closer. Virginia burst in.

What I had not explained earlier was that Virginia was not only a neighbor from across the street. She was also Raymond, my step-father’s real daughter from his previous marriage. I had not explained this earlier because if I had, I would have also have to have explain that Virginia was some sort of a much older step sister and that she had a right to tell us what to do and what not to do. Right now, she had a right to come running up the stairs and straight into our house.

Virginia wasted no time. “Where is your father?” She asked. I knew when she asked me that the screaming had something to do with us. I knew that I did not want to know the next bit.

I was limp. All I could think of was a direct answer. “He’s at work.” I replied.

Virginia spared me for the time being. She said nothing, but ran back out of the house through the back porch. I followed her. We ran into the empty lot. I could not put it off any longer. I asked her what was going on.

She was very wound up. But now she did me another favor. She stopped and turned around and looked straight into my eyes. “Ricky hung himself,” she said. She could not go on. She let out a long wail of torment, turned around and ran back to her house.

It did not make sense to me. Ricky had been on the back porch doing what Shelia had asked him to do. Just twenty minutes would have passed without my going out to him or him coming back to join me in front of the TV. My brain must have packed up after these ruminations. I found that I had stopped breathing. I was looking at spots in front of my eyes.

I then saw the neighbor who lived on the other side of the empty lot. He was walking away from me, out of the empty lot. He had a large knife in his hand. I followed all this with my eyes, not letting my mind connect. But my mind was slowly coming back. I had heard what Virginia had said. I had seen our neighbor walking away. He had used that knife for something he did not want to use it for. I knew now that it had to involve Ricky. I knew that what Virginia had said was true.

Ricky and I had woken up that morning and now I was waking up again. I knew what had happened. I could do nothing but had to do something. I started to walk towards our trophy tree, the one on which we had at first propped up the board, built a double storeyed tree house and then had Ricky take that down. We had not been playing regularly out in the empty lot and the grass had grown back to quite a height. Once I passed the high grass I saw it.

I saw my brother Ricky lying on the ground. He was wearing our favorite shirt, something I had missed just a little while ago when he had gone out towards the back. He was lying on the ground just below the 4 foot by 4 foot board that was the only sign of our tree house. It spanned across the two large branches. This was where I had been a few days or a week ago, accepting my forfeits and feeling unhappy.

That scene had changed drastically. A rope dangled from the middle of the 4 by 4 board. It had been cut clean with the knife that was now probably back in our neighbor’s kitchen. The other part of the rope was wrapped in a noose around my brother’s neck. His eyes were open and he was looking straight at me.

I had a tiny hope. I moved to the side to see if his eyes would follow me. They did not. Ricky had finished his business with the pretend rope and the telephone wire barely half a day ago. Except that this morning it had been a real rope. He must have jumped with the noose around his neck from the board in our tree. Ricky on the ground with his eyes wide open was in a position as if he had just jumped there during play. One of his legs was bent. Ricky’s body had fallen awkwardly and the bent leg was hidden under his body. The neighbor must have just cut the rope and let his body fall.

I stepped closer to Ricky. I could still see the faint blue bruise marks from last night on his neck. I could see that his neck was badly swollen because of what he had done today. The rope around his neck was still there. I could barely see it because of his swollen neck. I thought I should loosen it. I started to reach for the rope.

That was when I heard a car break to stop out near the kerb. I heard heavy footsteps running towards Ricky and me. I looked up and saw Carlos, my step-father’s son from a previous marriage running towards us. Virginia must have telephoned a few people. I was glad for her presence earlier. I was glad that it had been her who had told me. I was glad that she had got Carlos across.

Carlos was a fireman. If anyone could help, he was the one. Carlos sat down next to me and put one arm around my thin shoulders. He told me that he had work to do and that I had to sit very still. He reached out and with both hands, managed to get the rope off Ricky’s neck. He started to conduct Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation on Ricky.

Within a few minutes I heard sirens approaching. I must have been a bit disoriented, because for a few minutes I was transported back to Nick’s house, to our play and to my sense of disbelief on that day. I was hearing the same sound of sirens, of different intensities and types. It was disbelief for me all over again. Within minutes there were the same group of vehicles attending to a response – the police cars, ambulances and a fire truck.

The paramedics were shouting instructions to each other. They were running over to where the three of us were, trying to take stock of what had happened. They took over and continued with CPR. They told me not to hang around. I wandered off in a daze and went and sat on the front porch. The image that came into my head now was that of Candle Face. She had shoved her face up to mine night before last. She knew about Ricky and the telephone cord. I thought she had been her usual insensitive self when she had poked fun at us and said that Ricky liked it, and that I should like it too.

I was devastated all over again. Could that have been a warning? Had I not had a sense last night that what she wanted was death? In my confusion and fright I had thought that it was my life that she wanted. My thoughts were racing around, not willing to be stilled. I then told myself sternly that those were just dreams. I was crazy if I thought that my dreams had anything to do with Ricky in real life…and death.

Sounds were piercing through my head and someone else took up screaming and more and more police cars started to show up. More and more people started to come over. Eric came over. His eyes were like saucers as he asked what had happened. I told him and he ran back home to tell his mother. Eric’s mother and father ran back outside. His mother was hysterical. She could not stop crying. No matter what she thought about us in general, she must have liked Ricky and she must have been feeling doubly bad about her opinions now.

I had missed Dennis and Frank since we had woken up this morning. They had been in Eddie’s house or his garage and now woke up to the crisis. They knew that something had gone badly wrong in our house, but they still did not know what exactly had happened.

As with Eric, I was the only one around to tell them what had taken place. Virginia had gone home in deep shock, as had our other neighbor who had acted in our time of crisis, no matter what we children had thought of him earlier. Dennis and Frank were running from up the street. They asked me what was going on. I told them what had happened but could somehow not mention Ricky by name. They both ran towards the empty lot. Several policemen had to stop them from getting any closer to Ricky’s inert body.

At the same time, a policeman came up to me on the steps of our front porch. He asked me if I knew the dead boy and if I knew where he lived. Again, I had the feeling of being the only person around who knew what had happened. I told the policeman that I was his younger brother. I pointed to Dennis and Frank where they were acting frantic. I told him that they were our older brothers. I told him that my brother who was now dead lived right here.

The policeman next asked if he could come in and look around. I took him into our living room and through it, to Ricky’s bedroom. The policeman took his time looking around the room. One crazy thought I had when he was doing this, was that he was rummaging through things in the same way that I had looked to see if Candle Face had hidden in the room that night.

The policeman flicked through Ricky’s notebook of poems and through his journal. I found a poem written by Ricky which Ricky had left on top of his bed. I picked it up and read a few lines of it before I realized that it was not really a poem, unless I was thinking of one of his compositions about death and destruction. Ricky had left a suicide note.

My head spun again. When had Ricky planned to write a suicide note and when had he left it on the bed? Had he decided on the real life rope when he had woken up this morning, or had he decided last night or even the night before that? My mind now turned not to Candle Face, but to Archie on TV. We had watched *All in the family* just some hours ago. When had a TV serial jumped into the real world to put the rope in Ricky’s hands?

The policeman was looking at me and asked to see what I had in my hands. I gave him the note. He read it as he shook his head. He placed the note carefully in his pocket and walked out to join the other policemen.

There was nothing for me now in our bedroom. I tried to sit down and read some of Ricky’s poetry, but every line told me how he felt. How he had given us some warning. A little later, I went back to the front porch. There were people everywhere. The number of men in uniform had dramatically increased and now there were dozens of police cars and other emergency vehicles.

People down the street and even further away were walking around trying to find out what had happened. Even the people from the telephone company were there, looking grim. I then saw an ambulance gurney being pushed to a waiting ambulance. On top of the gurney was my brother Ricky. His head and body were covered up with a white sheet just like he covered himself before he slept. My older brothers were still trying to get closer but the police kept wrestling them back.

I realized that some hours had passed when I saw my mother drive up the street. The day and the afternoon had passed and she was coming home from work. Ben Howell Drive was not a very broad street. She was having to weave in and out between all the emergency vehicles to get to our house. Dennis and Frank saw her and alerted some of the men in uniform. Our older brothers, I could see, were walking towards her car as she slowed down. Several policemen were with them.

Shelia must have known that something was wrong because she jumped out of the car in the middle of the street and started running. She had heard Ricky’s name mentioned. She was running towards her older boys and had probably not noticed me alone on the porch. Frank ran past her towards the car and dived into the driver’s seat to park it – something he had done effectively but in completely different circumstances barely last night.

She held on to Dennis’ arms and turned around to look at the white sheet covered gurney. Though no part of his face or hair could be seen, she knew instinctively who was covered under it. She sensed what was wrong and let go of her hold on Dennis. She began to run towards the stretcher and the gurney.

The police tried to stop her but she ploughed through a barrier of several policemen with her large body, weight and strength. It carried her through towards the ambulance. The policemen were finally able to catch up with her at the ambulance. Dennis was running behind her. He caught her too and told her in words what she had suspected ever since she had shot out of her car. Shelia collapsed to the ground.

The ambulance drove off. The paramedics could do no more. Most of the other emergency vehicles left as well. Shelia stayed where she was on the ground, screaming and crying. Dennis and Frank sat with her and were trying to console her, but for all purposes she was on her own, with her thoughts and her guilt. For she thought that she had brought on Ricky’s suicide.

I could have told her that I had tried to talk to her. That Ricky had taken to writing dark, mysterious poetry long before he had tried that trick with fake blood which had alarmed and angered her. That there were a multitude of other warnings, and that I was not sure if Candle Face had given me a warning. And that if I had dreamt the whole thing, there was no Candle Face, not really.

But the fact was that Ricky had taken his own life. No one person, not Ricky, surely, was to blame. I could not accept the thoughts running around in my head. I could not even take my mother’s screaming and crying anymore. I had to go someplace safe. Raymond’s son Carlos had left with the fire truck. He was not there to help me feel any better. I quietly left for Michael’s house. I stayed on for many hours. His family – his mother and father understood and were good to me and for me. Sylvester was too young to know what Ricky’s suicide meant.

I was in no hurry to return home. When I did, my first realization was that my mother had stopped crying. She had collected her emotions to herself and had quietened down. Raymond must have come home in the hours I had been away, but I could not see him. I learnt later that he had taken upon himself the responsibility of going to the morgue for Ricky’s body.

I walked into the living room through the front door. My mother was sitting there. She saw me and opened her arms and I ran to her. She held me for what seemed like an eternity. She had gone back to being my own comforting mother. She had loved all of us in her own way. She had misjudged Ricky’s action and Ricky had misjudged her reaction. Right now, Shelia had gone back to her usual quiet self. But she was going to carry a deep sadness and a regret for the rest of her life.

## Chapter 31

Ricky had loved poetry, among his creative pursuits. The teachers and students at Molly Dawson had loved him for his poetry and our group of friends considered it a special treat when Ricky read poetry in the tree house. We in the family had not always been able to appreciate Ricky’s poetic efforts, though the fault lay with our own ignorance. I knew that Ricky loved to get up on stage and recite poetry and he loved to write poetry. He had the gift, despite his dark phase, when the poetry he wrote reflected the anguish in his soul. I remembered the time before this, when he had written about love, harmony and peace.

Ricky’s romantic phase of poetry writing had been his best. He had been in love with Maria, in a way that was only possible at age twelve. He had never really got to know her so she had remained his mysterious muse. He knew that her mystery had inspired the best of poetry from him, and I did too. He had probably written all of his poems about love and peace with Maria in mind. Only he knew that and I had guessed it. Both of us had also come to realize that Ricky cherished one of the Maria poems more than the others. I knew this because he took the maximum pains to write it and then hide it. It was not on a regular page of his notebook of poetic compositions, but a scrawl on one of its margins. He would read it often and had probably thought that the rest of us would not pay this poem a lot of attention. His notebook was there for anyone to read, anyway.

Strangely, after he died our older brothers exhibited their own anguish in a number of ways. I could see that Frank was badly affected. He never mentioned that afternoon when he had wronged Ricky by harming him, but the fact of it was written all over his face and behavior when he entered our room now.

Frank would never come into our room earlier during the daytime. He only stumbled in when he was sleep walking. I wonder what he had sought on such occasions and what kind of dreams he could have had? I suppose he had conveyed his love to Ricky when he had stood up for Ricky against that bully Carlos. Frank was also not one to express his feelings in words, or to sit down and discuss how he felt. He was a doer, and I was glad that he had allowed his actions to speak for him down in the creek weeks ago.

Frank came into our room in full consciousness and often since Ricky died. I had found a little peace when I thought of the good, quiet times when Ricky had been inspired to hole up in our room with me or just by himself. Some of these staying-in sessions had also inspired him to write. It could be poetry, it could be a story and it could even be an entry in his diary. Frank may have got the same sense of our brother’s life here in our room.

When he came across something he believed to have belonged to our dead brother, he would handle it with tenderness. At the sight of anything that belonged to Ricky, or something he had written, Frank would pick it up and go over it with infinite care. It was natural that he found Ricky’s notebook. He began not only to read it, but he was obviously absorbing it page by page and line by line. Frank went over Ricky’s earlier style of poetry about love and peace a great deal.

I knew, and our parents knew by now, that Dennis and Frank had dropped out of school. But Frank was now being drawn into his own kind of study. I did not know just now, but Frank was going to go back. And he was going to excel in his chosen field. I had been an obviously cynical eleven year old when I looked down on Dennis and Frank’s musical ambitions.

But Frank was going to take a fresh look at philosophical issues. He was going to address humanitarian and environmental concerns when he ultimately launched his music group with Dennis and Eddie.

Dennis too, would respond to Ricky’s poetry through his philosophical lyrics, though that was still in the future. Frank now offered Ricky’s later poems about lack of peace to Dennis to read. But Dennis was still his own person. He had shown aggravated concern along with Frank on the day of Ricky’s suicide, but Dennis was not one to want to know Ricky as a person as Frank now did.

Ricky was most proud of the poems he had written about Maria. Frank was not aware of Ricky’s real-life situation at the time that Ricky had written his odes. But he realized now. He wanted to know how Ricky had felt at the time, and Ricky’s poems gave him what he sought. Frank also found the gem among Ricky’s poems. He found the one that Ricky had cherished more than the others when he browsed through the poetry collection in our room. He immediately copied it and took it down to the Wilke Clay Funeral Home. This was the funeral home where Ricky’s body was lying in a casket before his burial. It was less than half a mile from our street.

On the appointed day, Frank, Dennis, and I were going to stand in a row facing Ricky’s body as he lay in the casket. Our mother had decided that he should be dressed in his Boy Scout uniform because Ricky was an active Boy Scout. The Boy Scout uniform had quite a few pockets. Frank placed the poem in the upper left pocket of Ricky’s Boy Scout uniform when he was sure that he had got down the right poem.

I guess Frank was now sensitive to details. He wanted the poem to be close to Ricky’s stilled heart. There was another little touch that Frank added. He had remembered that Ricky liked to drink at least one can of Dr Pepper’s root beer every day. He placed a can of Dr. Pepper’s into the casket beside Ricky’s body.

**Chapter 32**

Three days had passed since Ricky had died. It was the day of Ricky’s funeral. All the people, young and old, who wanted to attend were gathered outside our house. According to the plans for Ricky’s funeral, our immediate family and close friends would drive from our house to Wilke Clay Funeral Home only half a mile away. Ricky was lying there in a casket. There would be a small service at the Wilke Clay Funeral Home. From there, we would go with Ricky’s body to the South Austin Baptist Church for his burial service.

I felt sad about the choice of Ricky’s burial ground, but I don’t suppose my mother could or would think of anything else. The South Austin Baptist Church was where Ricky and I had been week after week for years to receive our religious education and instructions. It was where Ricky’s love of writing and of dramatics on stage had flourished. He would now lie in their cemetery for this eternity.

I imagined some of us would be there every week to tidy his little grave and say their prayers. Shelia had consulted all of us about the inscription on his gravestone. Frank had suggested two lines from one of Ricky’s poems, but Shelia had taken over in the last couple of days since Ricky’s death. She knew what she wanted for Ricky. It was going to be a traditional tombstone.

I had still not got used to going to sleep alone and waking up on my own. I slept fitfully, scoping out the room and Ricky’s empty bed before I fell asleep again. I saw no signs of anyone at night. There was no disturbance, no Candle Face, nothing. Sometimes, at night, I would be aware of someone else in the room looking at Ricky’s bed and towards me.

I knew it was my mother. She did not want me to get up for the next day, as she did on school days. I woke up early on the morning he was to be interred. I thought I was up early, but I could hear sounds in the living room and kitchen which meant that most of us were already up. All of us were going to get ready according to various details we had thought of, for Ricky’s funeral.

Our mother had decided on the Boy Scout uniform for Ricky. I, and all of our neighborhood group of children were going to go in our Boy Scout uniforms. Getting down to Breakfast and then getting ready in our Boy Scout uniforms did not take a lot of time. We were all ready and waiting.

We were waiting for my mother who was also ready but still in her room. After the first day when she had driven up towards our house and had to half guess the truth before she knew that Ricky had died and her complete collapse, Shelia had come to terms with everything. She had made decisions and done whatever she had to do. But today, on the day of Ricky’s funeral, she found she could not face it. She did not want to leave the security of her bedroom. She felt that she just could not emerge from there and lead the rest of us to the funeral home and on to the Baptist Church for Ricky’s burial.

Everyone was outside except for my mother. My father kept going back into the house to knock on the door and tell her it was time to leave. But she was not ready to leave the sanctity of her room. I was wondering if any of us boys should go in with Raymond and offer to accompany her out.

In the meanwhile I had walked outside and was waiting on the porch. There were dozens of people standing around. Some were sitting in their cars waiting for my mother before all the cars drove to the Wilke Clay Funeral Home. I looked around and for an instant felt acutely conscious. I felt that I was under their scanner.

There were people from our locality, our friends from the neighborhood and from school. There were teachers and even our school Principal, all of whom had been fond of Ricky and would feel his absence. But I felt that everyone, adults and children alike, were staring right at me.

I knew they felt for me as well but I did not want their pity. I walked away, to the side of the house that faced Eric’s house. There seemed to be a gathering of dogs here; these were the neighboring dogs and there was Eric’s on the other side of the fence. At least I would be at peace with them, away from people. I often thought of them as my dogs. For all purposes, they could have belonged to me.

They had alerted me to an unwanted presence a long time ago. Now they signaled the sight of me walking towards the side by barking. I walked up to the fence and placed both hands through the fence to pet them. I felt at ease. There was Eric’s big dog, a couple of dogs that I knew and there was a little Chihuahua. She had an immediately calming effect on me, and maybe me on her. She stopped barking and quietened down. The others did too.

I ruffled their head and ears and petted my dogs, Behind me I heard someone knocking. It seemed to come from the other side, across the back porch, from my mother’s bedroom window. This window was located above the chain-link fence, at the spot where it joined the house. I thought that maybe my mother was signaling to me. Maybe she did need me to come across to give her the courage to emerge from her bedroom. I turned away from the dogs and looked up.

But it was not my mother I was looking at. Instead I saw what appeared to be my brother Ricky looking straight at me. I had to shake my head and look away. I was terribly unsure as to whether I had been having visions for months now. But the barking dogs were now quiet. They had begun to lie down though they still looked towards me. They were at peace. Perhaps with all the happenings and with the crowd out in the front who had made me edgy, my eyes were playing tricks on me, I told myself.

But when I looked away the knocking sound became louder and more insistent. My attention was being called back to my mother’s window. I steeled myself and had to look up again. It was Ricky I was looking at, again.

“Here I go again. Why do I keep experiencing visions like these?” I asked myself. But this time I did not force myself to look away or lower my eyes. I was looking steadily at Ricky. I began to notice little details. Ricky was angry and was looking angrily at me. His hair was messed up. This was not his usual neat self. He was wearing our favorite shirt, the one he had jumped off the board in. It was the shirt he and I used to fight over, not the Scout’s uniform in which he was lying in the casket, and identical to the ones we had all been persuaded to wear for his funeral.

It was Ricky I was looking at, the Ricky I had known had he not been lying in the casket in that funeral home. It was still calm on this side of the house. The dogs were at rest and I was not frightened as I used to be during Candle Face’s visitations. But as I carried on looking at him, Ricky’s angry look appeared to grow. He banged on the window and made a cutting motion across his neck and then pointed at me. I just looked steadily back at him. Somehow I was still not afraid.

I heard a screen door creak open and then slam shut. The sound had come from Eric’s house. I took my eyes off Ricky and turned around to see Eric walking towards me. He was in his own Boy Scout uniform as planned, to match what Ricky and me and the others would be wearing. While my head was turned towards Eric I heard the knocking start up again from the same window of my mother’s bedroom. Except that it was now a banging sound. Whoever was making the noise must have been annoyed because I had looked away.

I looked up. Ricky was now pointing at me. He was wiggling his index finger towards himself, beckoning me to come inside. I had to turn away to look back at Eric. Eric had nearly reached the spot where I had been standing and I wanted to know whether he could see what I could see. Eric had stopped in his tracks. He looked like he did when we played ‘statues.’ Eric had stopped with one foot in front of the other, as though he had turned into a statue. He had spied what had absorbed me across on the far window of my mother’s bedroom. I had not been so wrong after all.

I watched Eric looking straight at the window I had been looking at an instant ago. Behind me the knocking – or banging, continued. I looked back again at the window my attention was being drawn to. I still saw Ricky. Again, I glanced at Eric. He was still in the same frozen position he had been in.

Unlike my fear factor with Candle Face, I had found that I could move. I had already turned towards Ricky at the window and back towards Eric’s house a couple of times. Now I found that I could talk as well. “Eric, what do you see?” I asked him.

“Ricky!” He responded right away.

By this time Ricky was banging on the window really hard. From the sound he was making, I could tell that he was using his force on the glass and the wooden frame. I thought it was going to break. But now Eric took the initiative. He had come out of his initial shock. Eric walked closer to me and said, “You should go in and see want he wants.”

I knew at this point that we were had the same view of Ricky. And of the fact that he wanted me to come in, that he wanted to share something with me. Eric and I were witnessing the same event. But something held me back. I could see that Ricky was terribly annoyed. I was wary. I needed someone. “I will go in only if you go with me.” I propositioned Eric.

He agreed and the two of us finally started to walk towards the house. I had known from the start of Ricky’s knocking and gesticulation that I was not going to be frightened. Eric had been shocked when he first saw Ricky, but seemed to have got over that. He had been with Ricky till the end, till that attempt that Ricky had made to harm himself.

I entered our house through the back porch door and we walked into the kitchen. My parents’ bedroom opened on to the kitchen at the back and I now found that their bedroom door was wide open. We could see right into the bedroom and even across to the window where we had seen Ricky from the other corner of the house. But now the spot where Ricky had stood inside the bedroom window was empty. There was no one there. Eric and I had seen him and had also been persuaded by him to come into the house and towards him.

I was at a loss and so was Eric. Ricky had wanted me to come inside. I had brought Eric with me. What had he been indicating? At this point I heard the toilet flush and a door open. My mother walked out of the bathroom and stood in the middle of her bedroom. She saw Eric and me standing in the doorway to her bedroom.

She looked surprised. “What were you two doing?” She asked.

“Ma, someone knocked from your bedroom window while we were waiting outside near Eric’s house. I wasn’t sure if it was you. But I thought that we were being called in. Mom, did you just knock on your bedroom window and call for me to come inside?” I asked. I had given my mother the closest explanation to the truth that I could, at this point.

My mother was in a daze, I could see. She looked around her room and looked back at me. She said “no.” Eric and I looked at each other wanting to ask each other questions we could not. We were sure of what we had seen. We were sure of the message we had received. Eric had even accompanied me in because we had been so sure. Now, of course, we were not. And we had nothing else to say to Shelia.

“Why?” She asked, then shook her head as though she was trying to get something out of it. She looked back at us and gave us a tiny nervous smile. “Never mind,” she said.

Eric and I left the house and sat on the front porch. My mother came out soon after that. She was finally ready to face her child’s funeral. I could not help but think that our awkward presence at he entrance to her bedroom had somehow helped. I would never know till another fifteen years that we had really been summoned inside. It had been to talk to her, for that short exchange which had brought her back to the present. But it was not Shelia who had asked us in. It had been Ricky.

We departed the house all together. The funeral went off smoothly and was conducted without any further incident.

Shelia was back to being her withdrawn, quiet self at home and among people. Eric and I never mentioned that event ever again. But we knew what each of us was thinking when we looked at each other in unguarded Moments, or spent time in companionable silence in our growing up years. I did not mention it to anyone else and I don’t think he did, either.

**Chapter 33**

Raymond had been doing his duty – to our mother and to the rest of our family. Among the four of us brothers, he had encouraged me in what he thought I was good at. My love of running and the successes I had on the running track were partly because of him. He made sure that I trained well enough on my own. He would make it his business to find out when and where the next run was on and suggest that I enter. He made sure that I was there whenever an important track meet was on. When I won, Raymond would take it upon himself to give most people the good news. He took pride in my achievements.

Except on the occasions when Raymond had disciplined me with his infamous backhander, we had managed to be close. But then all of the rest of us had experienced that when Raymond decided that we could do with some discipline.

Raymond’s brand of discipline may have driven my brothers off, especially Dennis and Frank. Ricky had tried his hardest to please Raymond in his own way. Ricky had hankered for some attention – maybe Raymond’s, probably our mother’s. Ricky had not received a great deal of encouragement from our parents in what he had excelled in.

I thought back to the time when Ricky had shyly brought his writings and poems forward for our parents to read and tell him what they thought. Raymond had more or less said no …to be exact, he had said that he was not in the habit of reading.. I would have been offended had I been in Ricky’s shoes. I was going to find out that Raymond is illiterate. I know this because Raymond told me, during one of our few meets when I was on a visit home.

Raymond was not married to my mother when he revealed this. I believed Raymond. I could see that this fact, - that he could neither read nor write, explained a great deal of his behavior which I had earlier put down as odd. I could now see that his refusal to read what Ricky had written was for this reason. I wish Raymond had been brave enough to acknowledge his inability when Ricky was alive. It would have saved my brother some heartache.

Whatever Ricky had achieved had been because of his own interests and our friends’ encouragement. He had expressed some jealousy about the bond between Raymond and me. He had tried to work it out in his own way and if he had expected some action he had taken it up with me.

The beatings I had received from Ricky still stung. I dwelt on all this at this stage. I had thought about it before. I would not talk to anyone else in the family about Ricky and nor would they. But I would find an ally as I struggled to come to terms with all this after his death.

I thought back about Ricky’s attempt at pleasing Raymond in the many matters of Raymond’s heritage. Ricky was the person who said a prayer for grace before a meal and he said it in Spanish because that was how Raymond had taught him. Under Raymond’s tutelage all of us had learnt to answer the phone in Spanish. Raymond’s Mexican relatives, especially his adult children from a previous marriage rang often and their language of choice with Raymond was Spanish. His daughter Virginia and son Carlos were family. I remember Virginia with a pang of guilt. She had our wellbeing at heart. Carlos the fireman was the first from the family who had dealt with Ricky’s death. He had managed to remain professional and show concern towards me during that brief period.

Ricky had adopted a number of habits from Raymond’s Mexican background partly to please Raymond and partly because he loved cultural variation. Ricky could adapt to new ways and new language fairly easily.

Raymond now said the prayer that Ricky used to say before dinner, but he greatly missed the way in which Ricky used to do this in Spanish. The rest of us had not taken that much of an interest in Ricky’s abilities at any kind of oration. My parents and brothers, especially Frank, now wished that they had been a little enthusiastic about his public readings. Frank wished he had partnered Ricky in his poetry writing and reading.

With Ricky gone, I doubted that the rest of our family would carry on with the Mexican traditions learnt from our father and others in the neighborhood. Right now I could see that Raymond might be having regrets about not drawing in Ricky. Ricky had begun to join Raymond and me when we watched TV. But Ricky had enacted his suicide from a one of those TV stunts. We had all watched that one on TV.

In any case, Raymond was conscious that he should have done more when Ricky was alive and now he wanted to make his own special gesture to remember Ricky by. He wanted to remember Ricky in his own way and according to the Mexican heritage. He and some of our neighbors talked about the Mexican tradition of placing a cross at the site of someone’s death. They also spoke of the old rumor about a child who had died in the house fire in what was now the empty lot next door to us. The belief was that a cross at the site of a death made sure that no one else would die there in the future.

Eric’s father came forward to help Raymond make the cross. He welded two pieces of metal together to form a cross. He then rubbed it down to smooth it out and painted it a glossy black. Dennis, Frank, the boy I thought of as their friend Eddie and I walked to the tree with the cross made by Eric’s father. We watched Dennis hang the cross from a small rope from the board at the same site where Ricky had died.

Raymond wanted a small ceremony. He and Eddie conducted a service according to Mexican church rites at the spot where the cross was hung. The others left after this but Eddie and I stayed on.

We hung around the tree that had been witness to so much of my life till now and Ricky’s life till his death. I had not talked a lot to Eddie before now, but today, after the service and with the cross on that board to remind us of Ricky (and the child or children who had died next door), I felt a strong bond with the eighteen year old from the small house down the street. He had always expressed that he liked us younger ones in his own way. He had taken some responsibility for Anthony in life. Dennis and Frank spoke about Eddie often and we were aware that he was hosting my brothers’ musical ambitions.

Eddie and I climbed the tree and sat on the 4 foot by 4 foot board. I thought about how this board had been the foundation for our tree house. Ricky had torn that down in a frenzy during one of his dark moods. Ricky had also used this board to tie the rope that killed him. Eddie and I sat there, reminiscing about Ricky. We talked about what we felt he liked or did not like and facts about his life here at Number 304 Ben Howell Drive. I told Eddie about how our house was special not only because it was next to the empty lot but because it had come here from far across Austin.

I gradually found that I could talk to Eddie a great deal and about everything. We spoke about Ricky for what seemed like a long time. We were talking openly at the site of my brother’s death. We had never spoken to each other like this before because I had always thought that I was too young to be talking like this to someone who was closer to being a man of the world.

I had thought of Eddie as my older brothers’ friend, not mine. Later, I would also be aware that all of my friends were my age or younger or about Ricky’s age. They were not eighteen, which was how old Eddie was. He was the oldest friend I would have, but I knew even now as I sat talking to him, that it did not matter.

We sat there for nearly an hour. Eddie mentioned that everyone loved me. It made me feel better, but I knew what he was doing. He was making sure that I felt loved and appreciated so that even if I ever had doubts, I would not end up dead like my brother Ricky. I, in turn, thought of him as a good person for taking time off for me. I respected him for that.

I would have to put Eddie’s mind at ease. I promised Eddie that I was different. I told him that I felt a lot more secure about life and living and would never commit suicide. Privately, I also thought that Eddie should have a chat with each of my brothers Dennis and Frank. It could be about matters other than suicide. But our chat seemed to satisfy Eddie. He pulled out a pocket knife and asked if I would like to become blood brothers with him.

Eddie’s request meant a lot to me. I knew that it meant the earth to him, because being blood brothers meant a lot where we came from. We had to have a little ceremony of our own to qualify. Eddie made a small deep cut on one of his fingers and handed the knife to me. I copied his action and made a small deep cut on one of my fingers as well. We pressed out a pinpoint of blood on those wounds and touched each of those fingers at that point. We pressed the points together. The two drops of blood, one from Eddie and one from me, mingled. It was official and it was knowledge we would always remember; we were bonded for the rest of our lives as blood brothers. We had pledged allegiance to each other.

I would never again feel uncomfortable talking to Eddie about matters that were of interest to me. It could be about my life or his, it could be about what we intended to do with ourselves in the next few years and even in the far future. Eddie and I never forgot and we stayed close. If ever my parents had to look for me, they knew where I would be – on the 4 by 4 board or else on the front porch, talking to Eddie.

Soon after this Dennis was sent off to a correctional facility because of his role in the attempted theft at Dunkin Donuts. Shelia missed him and so did Frank. I did too, just a bit. Frank began to spend more time over at Eddie’s garage, writing lyrics and playing music. Now Frank would show me his compositions. I marveled at his writing, and could match it in my head to Ricky’s poetry. Eddie and I thought that Ricky had a gift for composition and now Frank had it. They had achieved this in different times of their lives and at different times of our lives as well.

Frank went back to school and became a different person. He managed the pressures of high school academics combined with performing with a band in Eddie’s garage. Frank was their chief songwriter and singer. Eddie finished school and took up a job. He married locally, became a responsible husband and father and moved back to Mexico. I lost touch with him but I am sure he thinks of how things used to be on Ben Howell Drive, as I do now.

As for the others in our group of friends, the only one who I know stayed behind in South Austin was Robert. He has lived on in that huge house left to him by his parents. Yet Robert was the one who felt his lack of freedom at that time. He was the one who wanted to get away.

The cross put up for Ricky and a child next door stayed atop the 4 by 4 board as long as I lived in our house. Our house may have been transported elsewhere or gone back to the road it came from, but maybe I will go back and look around for that tree sometime. I want to know if Ricky’s cross is still in place.

**Chapter 34**

Ricky had been popular in his class and with everyone in school. His classmates had rallied around him when they realized how cut up he felt after he had wooed Maria unsuccessfully. No one ever held a grudge against Ricky. After he died I could gauge how popular and well loved he was in our school by teachers and students alike. Our school Principal had come to the service for Ricky at the Wilke Clay Funeral Home.

It quickly became clear that our school was not going to forget Ricky. Ricky had always been asked to play the lead in all school and church plays. He was the solitary theatre personality in the tree house among us in the neighborhood. Among our group of boys Ricky could hold his own with a whole Act of a play and do all the characters in turn. All the teachers in school seemed to know Ricky.

When I went back to school a week after his death, his teachers made it a point to come up to me and talk to me about how sorry they were about Ricky. Most of the teachers sent notes. Ricky had been a very special student at Molly Dawson.

I became very conscious of students stopping to stare at me. I would see them shaking their heads. The more confident and friendly ones would nod and talk to me about Ricky. I tried to ignore those who did not know what to say. With them I would try to pay no attention and just walk on. Some students would even come to me and ask why Ricky did it. These may have been children who did not know Ricky as a person. Besides, they hardly knew me. I had no answer for strangers. At times I would feel like I had been singled out for others to stare and shake their heads at. I felt terribly self conscious at times.

At home my room stayed the same after Ricky died. I had been aware on the first day when I had entered our room with the policeman, that some of Ricky’s toys and personal effects were missing. No one had been into our room since Ricky and I had woken up that morning and gone out for our breakfast and our chores. I believed at the time that he must have hidden them or thrown them away so no one else could use them. I also thought about his invisible friend Griffin. Could Ricky have given them to Griffin to play with?

Frank had found Ricky’s notebooks but he had always kept everything back where he found them. My parents let everything be and did not remove his bed. I was now sole occupant of what had once been our room. I was sole owner of those clothes we used to share and fight over. I found that it was no longer fun to have the better clothes to myself. My room felt just the same as when the two of us had shared it. I tried telling myself that when he was there, he had not really been there. Ricky always seemed to be in deep thought, especially in the last couple of months.

In the old days I would never be able to argue with Ricky about who should switch off the light. Now I did not want to switch it off and did not have to switch it off. I no longer had to run and leap into my bed. I did not want to check for Candle Face. I had done that the two nights before Ricky died. I was sick at the thought that she might want to terrorize me at this vulnerable stage. So after he died, I slept with the lights on after Ricky died. That was the only deterrent against Candle Face’s presence.

She knew that I would not have to see her against the light from the window. She knew that she could not hide with my room light on.

Sleep was still not easy. It was one particular night. It was warm, and my habit of the tightly wound sheet was unraveling. My sheet was loosely covering me. I was lying in bed with my eyes wide open and thinking about what people in school had said about Ricky today. Everyone had a nice word. I dwelt on that, and felt a deep regret about all the mean things I had said and done to my brother. I was doing an extensive soul search, thinking about how I could have done things differently. I regretted anything that I may have done or not done to bring about Ricky’s suicide.

I had seen the signs, taken little action and had hung back. I had not taken adequate action. I had not been a brave enough eleven year old to stand up for his slightly older brother.

It was late and I should have been fast asleep. I heard a knock on my outer bedroom door, the one that led to the front porch. I got up unthinkingly to answer the door. The door started to swing open and in that instant I stepped back. Did I want to open the door for another torture-filled night? Had I been about to make the mistake of letting in Candle Face?

It was too late. The door was now open wide. I did not have to worry about Candle Face. I was a little taken aback at who I was looking at. It was an old man outside my porch door. He introduced himself as a tour guide. Come to think about it, he looked like someone steeped in his own concerns. He appeared to be preoccupied. Not only that, but he was dressed unlike any other people of his age. He had long white hair under a long white cap with a pointy end which hung down his shoulder. He had a long droopy moustache and a long beard. He matched all this with a flowing night gown, like people used to wear in the old days in pictures I had seen in books and on TV. He said that he was here for a tour around Ricky’s room. I was taken off guard again. A tour late at night by someone ready to go to sleep? I knew that Ricky was popular, but this was something new.

The old man stepped inside. Without further permission preamble he turned and spoke over his shoulder to say, “OK, folks, we’re going in.” I craned my neck to look at who he was talking to. I had been surprised to see the old man. Now, I could only say that I was amazed at what I saw. There were about twenty kids standing behind him in a line, single file. They had all the new electronic gizmos such as cameras slung around their necks. As soon as the tour guide beckoned them, they obediently began to drift into my room.

The tour guide obviously took his work seriously. He pointed to Ricky’s bed and said, “This was Ricky’s bed.” The kids clapped and took pictures of the bed. It took them a few minutes and some of them wanted better angles. There was small confusion about which of the beds used to be Ricky’s. They decided the neatly turned one was his. They looked at the one with a sheet thrown loosely and decided that Ricky was a more organized person than to want that one, even if he was no longer there.

Finally the children and their tour guide were satisfied. He got them on to the next interesting exhibit. “Let’s move along now. This was Ricky’s window. He loved to look out the window as he wrote his poems,” was what the tour guide now said. The kids clapped louder and took more pictures…from inside our room, while some of them went outside for better photographs.

As the tour guide got further into the room, I realized that there were many more kids than the twenty I had estimated at first. There were more children filtering in. They chattered and pointed to things. They pointed out anything to each other if they thought their friends may have missed it. They took pictures, drew small sketches and took notes incessantly. Everyone looked happy to be crowded inside what Ricky had once called his bedroom.

No one paid the least bit of attention to me until I coughed and brought myself to the notice of the last person in the tour line. A boy who looked like he was a year or so older than me turned around, looked at me in amazement and asked loudly, “Who’s that?” I had been brought to the tour guide’s notice since that first brief introduction on his part. But he seemed to have forgotten about that. I felt like I might be an exhibit but one not to be taken note of, when he said in a low voice, “Oh, that’s just Ricky’s younger brother. Don’t pay any attention to him.” I was a little flummoxed. Tonight had been the opposite of what had been happening to me in school since Ricky had died.

The kids booed me. No one took my picture. I knew that Ricky would continue to hold centre stage among the teachers and kids at school, but who were these children? They adulated Ricky as our fellow students in school did, but I could not recognize them, or the older adult with them.

They continued moving through and around my room and now it was they who were trying to ignore me. I looked again at the last child, the one who had asked the tour guide who I was. I flushed as I recognized him and realized that the boy had Ricky’s looks. He was Ricky. For some reason Ricky was taking the tour of his own room. He was checking on his bed, his window and maybe his books and notebooks. As far as the strange tour guide and the other children were concerned, Ricky no longer knew who I was.

I wanted to hold this moment, and I did not. For a few seconds, I not only missed Ricky as I had known him in my life, but I missed Eric as well. I wished that Eric had been here to share this with me, as he had done last time. But there was more to come.

I had noticed that everyone had looked happy as they clicked away. Everyone, that is, except for Ricky. Ricky was still wearing the same shirt that he died in. I had seen this on him on the day of his funeral, when he had beckoned at me to come towards him from our parents’ window. All the kids were taking pictures. They did not notice us.

We seemed to be having a separate mimed communication. Ricky now began to point at me and then point at his neck to draw attention to it. So Ricky was no longer ignoring me. Maybe he had recognized me after all.

The tour guide had taken over completely. He was now behaving as though he owned the place and owned me. He pushed me to the side so that the children could have a good look in our small room and so that they could get around me unobstructed. I felt suffocated with so many people in my room. At the same time I did not know how to hold this instant when Ricky had come back to tour his room and had drawn my attention.

The tour guide decided that it was now time to leave. He stepped outside to the porch through the same door through which he had entered with the children. All the children followed him, like the Pied Piper. My eyes were transfixed on Ricky as he took one last mournful look at me and departed with them. Like the Pied Piper and his children, I never saw the unknown children again.

I would have liked Ricky to stay, even if he had forgotten who I was. I would have liked him to go to sleep in his own bed, however he wanted. He could have changed out of that shirt and into any of our pyjamas. But the next morning, I woke up alone. I looked across to Ricky’s bed. There was no one there.

It would be another many days or weeks when Ricky would want to come back and sleep in his own bed. I would not know what to day or do when he did.

But on the morning of the day after this event of the tour guide and his tour, I remembered about the children taking a look around our room. I remembered that Ricky had pointed to me and to his swollen neck. It was a dream. It had to be. But when I sat up in bed and swung my feet down on the floor, I could see muddy shoe prints all over my bedroom floor. Most of them had been made by children’s shoes. There was one set of adult footprints in the medley of shoe prints.

**Chapter 35**

There was one major change in my life right around the time that Ricky died. I started going to a baby sitter’s house to be looked after. My parents had taken this decision for me even before Ricky died. It started some six weeks before and continued for another month or two afterwards. I have never been able to figure out why I suddenly needed to go to a baby sitter’s once a week. On other afternoons, while Ricky was there, both of us would be at home at approximately the same times.

Had my mother or my father noticed the same changes in Ricky that I had noticed? And, had I given out any signals that I should not be at home alone by myself or with only my sibling for company? I am afraid that I will never know now.

In any case, my parents had decided on a babysitter for me. I knew her as Mrs. Hemenis and she became quite a part of my life then and even later on account of some truths she taught me.

Officially, the facts were that Mrs. Hemenis was my part time babysitter after school. My parents were going to carry on taking me to her house about once a week for three whole months. I was baby sat during those crucial months of my life before and after Ricky’s death.

While he was there, the other relevant but unasked question from my side was why it was only I who had to go and not Ricky. I know that after he had turned twelve he did not have to be baby sat officially and Ricky may have just said no. But I did not want to be baby sat at Mrs. Hemenis’ house either. I was eleven and nearly there. Besides, care was not her strong point. Mrs. Hemenis did not always want me inside her house. There were other older children I had to contend with, in her surroundings. The fact remains that I had to go Mrs. Hemenis’ house and Ricky did not.

I can truthfully say that I started out hating it there at Mrs. Hemenis’ house. At first I hated everything about going there. I hated the drive there with my parents, knowing that they were going to go on to better chores after I had been deposited safely at the Hemenis’. I hated the block where she and her husband lived and I hated the apartment she and her husband lived in. Things were not perfect in my family or for me at school, but Mrs. Hemenis and her husband belonged to a group of older people I had never met with. I knew and liked my friend Nick’s grandparents, but the Hemenis’ were completely unlike them, as well.

For one, she and her husband lived in a small dark apartment, unlike mine and my friends’ homes with one or more porches and lots to play in. Then, there wasn’t anything in their apartment to play with. I was not even allowed to bring toys over to their house either, except for one small fire truck. The only interesting things in the apartment were Mr. Hemenis’ medical gear. He had lots of it. There were tracks on the ceiling to transport Mr Hemenis around in slings and chairs hung from them. That was fascinating, but I had been told that I could not ride on them. There were tubes attached to paraphernalia for him to breathe from when he had trouble breathing. I did not try that. I had been told by a coach that my lung power helped me run faster and longer. I did not need to literally stick my nose into breathing apparatus. There were walkers and wheelchairs for Mr Hemenis to get around on.

I tried an electric wheelchair when I thought that Mrs. Hemenis was in the bathroom. That was loads of fun, but there was not a lot of space for me to get around in. Mr. Hemenis watched me at it with a twinkle in his eye. He did not tell on me later and I think that after a few weeks he had become a sort of ally.

It was a pity, because Mr. Hemenis was an old man that just sat or slept on the couch all day. Mrs Hemenis tried switching on the TV for him but he did not like most of that either. I tried it a couple of times, to watch my favorite program. I like to think that Hemenis had started warming to it. Unfortunately that was around the time my baby sitting came to an end.

Sometimes Mrs. Hemenis would let me play outside. But it was not much better, outside. The apartments were old and rundown. I do not recall seeing a single blade of grass, except for the weeds that grew through the cracks in the walls or the asphalt outside. But I managed to keep myself occupied. Mrs Hemenis allowed me to play with my fire truck in front of her door. At those times she would let the door to her apartment to be left open. Later, she would prefer me to play outside her door so as not to be bothered.

I remember one particular day when I was playing outside near the driveway to the ugly blocks and innumerable apartments in those blocks. A school bus drove into the blocks and a group of boys and one girl got out. They were older than me and seemed older than Ricky as well. I thought they could be closer to Dennis and Frank in age. Maybe they were about sixteen years old. As they walked pasted me, one of the boys purposefully kicked my fire truck out of my hands. The truck flew off by a couple of feet. I ran to pick it up, but was at a loss as to how to react to their behavior. The boys and the girl thought that I was funny. All of them started to laugh at my predicament.

The next time I was at Mrs. Hemenis’ apartment and she sent me outside to play when it was time for the school bus to return, I was on my guard. I was clutching on to my solitary toy, my fire truck, when another boy walked up and tried to kick it away as he walked past me. I moved my fire truck to my other hand just in time for safe keeping when I saw his kick coming. I moved aside just in time.

The boy turned around and told me to stand up. But when I stood up he punched me in the face. Besides the hurt on my face, I was amazed that a sixteen year old boy could just punch an eleven year old. He then prised the toy out of my sweaty palms and threw it some distance away.

I ran to my fire truck, picked it up and ran back into Mrs. Hemenis’ apartment. Dented or not, it was my most cherished possession just now. I thought of the bully Carlos who used to beat up Ricky till Frank stepped in. I had hoped for some protection from my baby sitter.

When I went in, Mrs. Hemenis was busy tidying her dining area. I wondered how and when she could step in for me in future. She was, after all, supposed to take care of me. I told her what happened as she stood there wiping her dining room table. I complained loudly, but she did not even look at me while I explained the ordeal I had just been through. Mrs. Hemenis said nothing. She kept her counsel and after awhile I kept mine.

Mrs. Hemenis had refused to talk about it or pacify me. The incident outside and in her house may have bruised my ego, but I was hopeful about her not wanting to baby sit me.

When they came to pick me up Mrs. Hemenis said nothing to my parents. During the drive home I told my parents about the bullies at Mrs. Hemenis’. I was not telling on anyone I should not be telling on. I complained about Mrs. Hemenis not protecting me enough. I begged my parents not to send me there anymore. They did not comment on my complaints either. But I was dropped off at Mrs. Hemenis’ house the next week and I was there at her house again the week after that.

I did not want to be sent outside to play at my baby sitters. I tried to be good and had left Mr Hemenis’ medical stuff, especially his wheel chair alone. I dreaded it when Mrs. Hemenis gave me her usual summons to go play outside at the usual time. I did not want to go, but I did not want to show Mrs. Hemenis that I was scared. She probably thought, as I did, that I did not need to be baby sat and that my arrival at her home was a nuisance.

Mrs. Hemenis had told me to go play outside was just before the school bus drove by. I forced myself to go outside to play. I saw the school bus enter, lost my nerve and ran back to Mrs. Hemenis’ door. But I now found that her door had been locked from the inside. I was in a panic as I cried and banged on her door. It did not open. The group of bullies had got off their bus and were watching me. They seemed to be in a good mood as they approached me.

I briefly considered running to another on of those awful apartments. But what if any of the unfriendly people there were worse? I had enough terror coming my way from Candle Face and had been warned often enough about not talking to, or asking for favors from strangers. There was no hope for me. The same boy who had thrown my toy last time sauntered up and punched me in the stomach without saying a word. I dropped my fire truck and went down on that cracked floor when he hit me. One of the other boys quickly grabbed my fire truck and walked towards the small dirty swimming pool a little way away. I watched helplessly.

Those nasty kids cheered as the boy tossed it into the pool. He did this despite my tearful state, the fact that I had not said anything when he hit me in the stomach and my cries to him to stop. One of the older kids now turned to me and gave me a vengeful push one last time. All of the sixteen year olds left, with me in a heap on the floor and my fire truck somewhere in that soupy swimming pool. I was still awfully frightened. What if they came back and did worse?

I still had to save myself. I managed to crawl to Mrs. Hemenis’ door. I managed to get my fingers around her door handle and haul myself up. It was just as bad from her side because when I tried to turn the handle, I found that the door was still locked. She would have surely heard me banging on her door earlier, and heard the commotion outside? Why was she determined to keep the door locked now?

I stopped to think. I had the distinct feeling that she had set me up to get beaten up. She had sent me outside just before it was time for the school bus to bring those children home. She knew, because I had told her, what had happened to me the other day after they had come home.

When she ultimately opened the door, I did not even bother telling her about what happened to me on this day. My stomach hurt, my pride had taken a knock and I had a feeling that she already knew.

I begged my parents again to never send me there ever again. My parents did not ask why. Any reticence on my part did not help because I found myself back at my baby sitter’s the following week.

I had already suspected that Mrs. Hemenis had set me up the week before, when I had lost my fire truck and taken a punch to my stomach. I had a nasty suspicion that she was doing it again this week, especially because she kept looking at the clock. When she decided that it was the right time for my lesson, she looked at me and told me to go outside. As with Candle Face, I could only take punishment to a certain extent. I refused point blank. My eyes started to water, yet opened all the way as I said, “no.” I wanted to stay inside.

Mr. and Mrs. Hemenis were not going to have any of this. “Boy, get your butt outside.” Mr. Hemenis commanded. I thought that Mrs. Hemenis had not heard me the last time. Now she had a mad look on her face, but she had decided that action was better than words. Her methods were direct. She came up to me and grabbed my hand. I was alarmed at her behavior, because she started to yank at my hand to force me up out of where I was seated.

I had to tell myself that she was an old weak woman forcing me to do something. I must have capitulated and helped her in this task because she managed to pull me up. She grabbed me by both arms and clutched my shoulder. Mr Hemenis was quietly watching this from his bed and now he chuckled. What happened next was to have a profound change in my life.

She was not going to stay silent. Mrs. Hemenis, who I thought had locked me out and set me up last week, was talking to me about life in general and me in particular. What she was saying was “Son, you need to learn how to stick up for yourself. You can’t let people walk all over you. Sometimes you have to fight and defend yourself. Now get outside and stick up for yourself.” She opened the door and shoved me out. There was nothing I could do. I had just confirmed that she *had* locked me out and set me up.

Mrs. Hemenis may have planted a basic idea about defending myself. But she had not elaborated on how I should do this. I had older brothers, one of whom had helped to teach a bully a lesson when he had beaten up my brother Ricky. That was a decision Frank had made. I was being told that I too had to make my own decisions in life. I would have to make decisions about myself – what to do now and what to do next.

I did not have a lot of time to dwell on the matter because at this instant when Mrs. Hemenis shoved me outside, the school bus came rolling in. The group hopped off and came walking up. They all looked thrilled to see me standing there. They must have known that I was going to be a sitting target again. As expected, the older boy punched me in the chest. My thin body flew backwards and hit Mrs. Hemenis’ apartment door.

Had Mrs. Hemenis heard me shoved against her door? Was she going to impose her brand of truths about self protection? Yes she was, I realized, when the door stayed closed and probably locked from inside, as it had the last time.

The only girl in the group walked up to me, clenched her fist and made punching movements an inch away from the tip of my nose. The boys stepped back to watch, smiling as though they were going to enjoy the outcome. The girl was in no hurry and took her time looking me up and down. She was smiling too as she looked back at the boys. They were going to play this game to the hilt.

The oldest boy said to me, “If you hit her, we will kick your ass.” I knew I could not hit her even before he had told me this. I had grown up playing with the boys in our neighborhood. Girls were banned from our group and I had never had cause to be angry with a girl till now. The girl facing me could not have known all this, but she stepped closer and began to lift her right arm, which I figured was her hitting arm.

I had been humiliated by this group last week and was now scared that I was going to get my butt kicked by a girl. I looked around wildly for some help. What I saw from the corner of my eye was Mrs. Hemenis looking steadily at me from her kitchen window. She lifted her hand and made a fist. She then punched the air. Was she suggesting what I should do? Was she suggesting that I hit my assailant, even if she was a girl? I supposed she was. But what about my assailant being a girl? And what about the threat to me, about the boys kicking my ass if I did?

The gang were unaware of Mrs Hemenis’ advice to me and they were unaware of her prompting from her kitchen window. The girl was getting ready to pulverize me. The boys behind her yelled out “now!” She got the last minute incentive she needed and began to throw her punch.

She did not know that I had something up my sleeve. I knew that I did not want to hit a girl. I made punching motions as Mrs. Hemenis had, a few seconds ago, in the air. I pretended that if she hit me, I would punch her back. Even as my fist got close, she withdrew hers. She also withdrew herself. She squealed and ran behind the boys.

The boys were now showing me who was in charge. The oldest one who had threatened me, approached me now and told me he was going to see his threat through. He was going to kick my ass. But I thought quickly on my feet. I no longer had to be concerned about having to hit a girl, even if she was at least five years older. Before he could hit me, I threw two quick punches and hit him in the stomach at least twice.

 I should have been scared again because my thin eleven year old arms didn’t faze him a bit, nor did my small fists. But his return punch to my face fazed me a lot. You could say that I could not do much but took a lot. I got beaten up bad that day.

When I ultimately staggered back inside their apartment, Mrs. Hemenis dressed my wounds. She had a smile on her face like my teachers sometimes had when I finally understood something complicated. *She* thought I had done alright by scaring the girl and hitting the boy before he could get a chance at me. That I had lost did not really matter to her. I gradually got to feel that she was actually proud of me. With this realization, I felt that I could be proud of myself.

I did not mind going back to her apartment after that. In fact I actually began to like it. Now I would wait for the school bus outside but the group of kids pulled no punches. They never messed with me again. Better still, Mr. Hemenis was my friend now, even if Mrs. Hemenis no longer gave me friendly advice that could work in the near-future.

Unfortunately, my parents either minded the fact that my face was bruised that day, or else they took my earlier pleas seriously. They stopped sending me to Mrs. Hemenis’ after a few weeks. Ricky was dead and I was going to spend more time alone in my room after school.

**Chapter 36**

One of my favorite pastimes as a child and even later, was to join in a race or to run on my own. I loved sprinting for its own sake and running gave me sheer joy. I ran everywhere. I would occasionally run the long road to school and Raymond made sure that I caught up with my running practice when I fell behind. I could easily do a lap of our neighborhood on most evenings. My childhood friends would later tell me that I was the Forrest Gump of my time in South Austin.

Ricky had passed away about a week ago. He had been put into his boy scouts’ outfit and laid at first in his casket in the Wilke Clay Funeral Home. On the day of his funeral he had been interred at the South Austin Baptist Church. My family had done their best to give him a decent burial. But I now felt that I should go and visit his grave. I was going to put my running ability to work to visit Ricky’s grave. I decided to run the four mile trip to the cemetery where Ricky lay buried.

I started from our house at Number three, passed all the houses on Ben Howell Drive and turned into Eden Drive. Cumberland Road came after that. It was a long run and I could see a couple of our friends who were walking down. They stopped to chat and I told them that I was going to do a long run to visit Ricky’s grave. They remembered Ricky with affection and told me what a great person my brother had been. They were glad I was doing this run all the way up to the South Austin Baptist Church. One of the girls was from our church and she said that she was sure that a contest was going to be announced in Ricky’s name the following Sunday. I was glad for the break before I carried on.

I then approached one of the main Avenues in South Austin and thought briefly about taking a short cut. But I felt that I should do the four miles for Ricky as planned. I went on to the grounds, running on the pavement of the broad main streets. It took a long while and some effort but finally I got to the cemetery.

I remembered that Anthony was buried here as well. It had been just a few months ago, after Anthony had irritated Ricky and me, and maybe Candle Face in her hole in the ground next door. I had guessed, but would never know for sure whether Candle Face had a hand in his death.

 I slowed down when I entered the burial ground and started to walk. I first walked by Anthony’s grave. I wanted to pay my respects to him. He had not deserved an early death by accident. Nor had Ricky deserved his death at his own hands. My mind was in a whirl as I walked on to my brother’s grave. It was about a hundred meters away.

Ricky’s was the newest grave among the many around me, I noticed. It was the grave where the earth had been turned just a week ago. It was tidy and clean and surrounded by cut flowers. There were brand new tiny saplings too. I had an idea that our mother had been coming here every day since Ricky had been buried. I stood in front of his grave, looking at the headstone. I was trying to clear my head of thoughts about the circumstances that had lead to Anthony’s death and Ricky’s.

I suppose I succeeded. At first I held on the image in mind of Ricky performing on stage in the tree house. I then gradually began to focus on Ricky as I knew him. I remembered what the boys and girls I had just talked to had to say. I was aware of Ricky’s talents. I began to wonder what he would have been like had he lived and when he got older.

I thought about how Ricky would have been the successful one. Even now, I think he would have grown up to be a professor or a famous actor, or a writer – a poet or an author of books everyone would want to read. I am proud of my function as an intelligence officer in the United States Army, but by the time he was my age Ricky would have been known by a great many people in our country and maybe all over the world.

I was seated on the soft grass in front of his grave. Now my thoughts grew muddled. My guilt surfaced again. I could not fight it. If I could not be as good or as talented as Ricky, I thought about how it should be me who should have died, not him. Ricky should have been given a chance to live his life. It should have been me in the casket below my feet under the ground.

And then I heard something. I did not know where it was coming from, but I could hear something faint. Whatever it was, it sounded like it was urgent.

My thoughts were not going anywhere and now I was distracted. I stopped my wayward thoughts and paid more attention to the faint yelling that I could hear. But it was still just a distant and incoherent yelling. I listened more carefully. I could still not figure out the words, but I could tell that the yelling did not sound as though it was coming from a distance across this green and peaceful cemetery. It sounded as if it was coming from below my feet, from under the ground. I stood there feeling and undoubtedly looking foolish. It could not be coming from Ricky’s grave, could it? I asked myself.

But yes, the shouting had to be coming from under the ground. It had to be coming from Ricky’s grave. I could make out this much though I did not want to. I told myself that I had to do something about it. What if I had not come here today? Our mother had been here as often as she could, but would she have not heard what I could now hear because of her all-enveloping grief?

I whipped myself into action. I lay down and placed my ears on the still fresh dirt over his grave. Within the next few seconds I could actually hear words clearly. I could hear a voice.

It was Ricky’s voice. He knew I was here and he addressed me directly. “Ray, help me. I am not dead. Help. It was a mistake.” It was my brother telling me that his suicide was a mistake. Burying him was a mistake as well. He had much to tell us.

My thoughts were shooting all over the place. “Oh my God. We buried him alive. I can’t believe we did that. I must get him out.” I said under my breath. I got down on my knees and started to claw away frantically at the soft dirt with my hands.

There was no time to go and fetch something to dig with. I had run the four miles and I would have to get on with what had to be done right away. It seemed like I had dug with my hands for hours. I could also not get away because I could see that both I and Ricky wanted to talk.

I carried on without slowing down, and talked to Ricky continuously. I apologized to Ricky for not seeing the signs for help that he was sending out. I told him that I knew that he intended me to be the messenger of his distress signals. And that I should have been more diligent. Ricky was in one of his introspective moods. He apologized to me for not being a better bigger brother. We talked and talked as I continued to dig what seemed to be fistfuls of mud of the smallest measure. At long last, I touched wood. I had finally reached his casket.

I had run out of breath without running. But I could not hesitate now. I used all the strength in my arms to pull the lid of his casket open. I knew he was there, but I was not prepared for the fact what happened.

Ricky quickly sat up. Things changed quickly now. Ricky had altered from his introspective bigger brother consciousness to attack mode. He lunged straight towards my neck. He was yelling, “It should have been you. You should be in here.” How could he have known that this was my exact thought when I had stood before his grave? Ricky continued to choke me but ultimately released my neck with one hand. Ricky seemed to have to have let go. I managed to get my breathing back.

It may have ended in disaster for me, because Ricky had other punishments in mind. He began to scratch my face with his hands and fingers and whatever nails he had. I could not withdraw. It was back to my paralyzed self for me. I could not and did not want to fight back. I could not have done anything because now I could not move. I fell into his casket in this state. I was totally unable to fend for myself.

Worse, Ricky closed the casket lid over me. I had not expected this, particularly after that long conversation we had had in which Ricky had apologized for the wrongs he had done to me. My soul and body were in pain. “Don’t, Ricky,” I said wordlessly. “I’m still alive, as your were.” We had not buried Ricky alive. My mind was telling me that Ricky in his casket had taken the same form as Candle Face.

The casket lid had shut. I do not know if I slipped into unconsciousness, or did what I had to, after this. Could I have recovered myself and opened the lid of Ricky’s casket? Could I have emerged from that now-dreaded spot underground and run the four miles home again? I had no time to think about these queries. All I knew was that I was waking up. The spot I was waking up in, was my front porch. I was still in the shorts and t-shirt in which I had run to the cemetery.

I had not been able to explain events to myself. If anyone saw me here waking from sleep I would not be able to explain events to them either. I jumped up and ran in to my bedroom before my mother came home. I slowed as I passed my bedroom mirror. I could see several scratches up and down my face.

It was true then, my four mile run and my discussions with Ricky before he turned on me as usual.

Or was it? I felt that to be sure, I should check on something else. I checked on my hands to see if they had any signs of all that digging for hours. When I looked at my hands, I saw the dirt under my fingernails. It was fresh, soft earth.

**Chapter 37**

The next day I felt it would be better to go to Michael’s. In fact, I spent most of the day at my friend Michael’s house after school. As before, I needed to feel safe. And Michael’s house, with his parents Mr. and Mrs. Romo and his brother Sylvester had always been the safest place for me. I did not know where Ricky was after he had shut me into his casket. What I did know was that I did not want to be anywhere near my house.

Michael's mother could see that I was really wound up. She was a kind person who relied on her religion to help her when she had a problem. She had faith in the Bible.

Michael’s mother explained how best to use the Bible when in doubt. She would sit on her bed and ask the Bible if her fear…any fear, was real. I tried it for myself. I skimmed through it, asked if Candle Face was real. I let it open on a page I should read. It opened on Luke 24:39. This was what I found:

*Look at my hands and my feet, because it's really me. Touch me and look at me, because a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you see that I have."*

It was a message for me, I felt. I read the verse over and over again. I thought about what the ghost did not have. Candle Face had no form. She did not have the flesh and bones. She could not be real.

Just then I heard Raymond whistle. Over the years, Raymond had devised a way of sending Ricky and me a signal without having to telephone. These were the days before cell phones. He had a particular whistle which was not only piercing but of a definite tone. It was his signature whistle and particularly useful as a sign that I should come home. It worked best when I was at Michael’s, since Michael lived on the street parallel to Ben Howell Drive. A couple of hours at Michael’s had helped me to feel better. Michael’s mother had helped me to pinpoint the answer to my most urgent query. I felt empowered to wish away any ghost.

I had heard my father’s whistle. That whistle meant that I had a minute in which to get home.

I went home as I was expected to. My father and I sat on the couch and watched TV. I had dinner with my family after that. I wished my parents a good night and went to my room to do a little homework and go to bed. I still felt awful and disturbed and knew that tonight was one night I would want to sleep with the lights on, as I had for the past many nights.

I did all that was expected of me. I even put off going to sleep by going back outside to ask my mother if she wanted any help with the dishes. She did. The dishes were washed and wiped. I finally got ready for bed, kept the light on and lay down on my right side so that I could have the best view of our room. I wanted to keep a watch, especially tonight. I was jumpy and did not want to be disturbed by Candle Face. I did not want Ricky either, especially after what had happened at the cemetery. Ricky was out of his casket. He had said that he had not died and had not wanted to be buried. I did not know how much of this was true and how much not.

I must have eventually fallen asleep. About an hour or so later, I heard faint sounds, as I had at the cemetery before I uncovered Ricky’s casket and then Ricky. I surfaced from sleep feeling tense and anxious. What I heard were faint, mumbling sounds like Ricky would make when he used to move and talk restlessly in his sleep.

I did not want to look at first, after my last experience in Ricky’s presence. But I knew that I would have to check out the scene ultimately. I was still on my right side. I reminded myself why I had slept on my right side…. to be able to see the room at a glance. I had to be a little brave now.

My eyelids opened slowly and cautiously. I looked across towards Ricky’s bed. I wanted to pinch myself. I was looking at Ricky lying on his bed wrapped tightly under his sheets. It was as though he had not died, had not had a funeral and had not been buried. It was the sight I had seen over many nights since I was little. The last time had been many nights ago. Rikcy was wrapped tightly in the sheets, as he used to be before his body was put on that gantry under a sheet and into the ambulance more than a week ago.

I had to will and wish myself out of this sight. “Here we go again,” I told myself sternly. I could not afford to stay in my dream-like state. Why could I not stop seeing and dreaming about Ricky and Candle Face? But this Ricky did something different to the old Ricky who always slept with the sheet covering his face and head. I realized that he was not asleep. He lifted his arm from where he lay and curled his fingers up towards his head. He pulled the sheet off his head and turned his face. He was looking directly at me. He had sensed that I had been staring at him as he lay on his bed under his sheet. .

I now did something that I had never been able to do before. I shut my eyes and turned my head away from Ricky. It was the only thing I could do just now if I had to think about my own safety. But I heard Ricky’s voice again. He was not mumbling in his sleep any longer. He was talking to me. I could hear Ricky calling for me from his side of the room. He was asking me to turn back around. He was asking me to look him in the eye again.

He was asking me to look at him, and not just in the eye. “Ray, look at me. Look at the rope burn on my neck. I tried to show them to you on the day of my funeral and again when I came in for that silly tour around our room. Don’t you want to see my rope burns? Don’t you want to feel them, feel how real they are? They are just the way they were the day that you and our brother Carlos laid me on the grass,” he was saying. I closed my eyes again. It had been a mistake to open my eyes to look towards Ricky’s bed in the first place.

Horrors were being forced on me. They were horrors I did not want to face up to, no matter how much Ricky pleaded with me. He had done that and then turned on me the last time, had he not? I had been empowered when I had read Luke 24:39. I did not want to touch him or look at him. I tried to pay no attention to him but my other senses were on full alert. I found I could hear better than normal. I could hear his sheet rustle and his bed squeak. He was either turning in bed or else he was getting up.

Ricky had done both. Within seconds, I felt cold air on my left side. Ricky’s cold breath struck me on my left ear. So he had died and had not been buried alive. I had released his ghost from his casket. My dead brother was talking to me. As before, he had forced his presence on me. The whispered voice that could only belong to Ricky was saying, “Ray, I’m here whether you like it or not. I don’t suppose you like it, because in any case it was all your fault. You’re going to get what’s coming to you.”

This time I did not move. It was not because I could not, but because I did not want to. I wanted to ignore him and I wanted him to know that I could ignore him. It was the only defence left to me. I heard Ricky’s soft footfalls as he walked away from my bed. I heard him laugh at my pretend play. I think he got back into his bed and under the sheets.

“Am I dreaming?” I asked myself.

I had the answer. “I can’t be dreaming because I am able to move. I have always been unable to move in my dreams, if those were dreams I had about Candle Face.” I sat up on my bed. I was still reasoning things out with myself. “See, I can’t be dreaming. Ricky is dead so it must be his ghost here in my room.” Then the doubts flooded in again as I asked myself, “Am I dreaming or not?”

I felt confused. I had to be confused if I did not know when I was awake and when I was asleep. But I must have fallen asleep again on that dreadful night when Ricky had come back. To think that I had wanted him to stay, on the night when the children had taken a tour around Ricky’s room!

I realized later that Ricky and I and the entire business of feeling guilty that he had died and I was alive, were part of what I sensed and heard from my own apprehensive self and from this Ricky.

Our mother would tell me years later that she had felt very guilty about her excessive discipline. She was to tell me that she had felt something like I was feeling now. But I did not know that at the time.

At the time, I could not tell myself that it had all been just a dream. As with Candle Face, there was evidence of Ricky having slept in our room. When I woke up the next morning, the first thing I did was to look across at Ricky’s bed. Ricky’s bed sheets were in a twisted mess. If he had lain down in his bed, he had to have moved a lot. I had to accept that he had come in and that he had slept in his own bed. He had possibly called out to me, as I could remember clearly.

I went to school that day as I always did, but could not focus on school work. I did not pay any attention to what went on in class. In a way this was not new because I never paid attention in class anyway. But this time I could not stop thinking about Ricky. I kept thinking about seeing him and hearing what he had to say in his spot at the cemetery and again last night.

The message I kept getting was that he wanted my attention. He had called out to me both times. But both times he had proceeded to make me feel worse and more threatened by his words and actions. Was I dreaming or not? Why was I able to move? Why had he just left?

**Chapter 38**

For the next few days I alternated between being in a state of dreamy suspension and thinking things through. It came to a head in those couple of days, but in a fashion the process had been going on for months. My thoughts and feelings had been trying to keep pace with the many events of my life that summer. The thought that predominated now was that I had not been able to keep up with Ricky. My latest escapades with Ricky – finding his casket and its aftermath, Ricky coming back to our room and his bed, kept running around in my head.

If it had been a dream, why had I been able to move in that dream with Ricky? I had been paralyzed with fear in all previous dreams – if they were nightmarish dreams in which Candle Face had appeared. What was the significance of that not being the case in the dream with Ricky – if that had been a dream too? How would I know in future that I was dreaming? Even if I had been dreaming on the night on which I thought Ricky had slept in his bed and had got up to threaten me, why were the signs of his presence there to see for me? Why had signs been left in apparently disturbed and twisted sheets the next morning when I woke up? And why were there always similar telltale signs the next morning when Candle Face came for me at night?

Was I in a suspended dream like state or was I awake every time I had seen Candle Face and then Ricky after he died? If I was not really dreaming, then I should be able to control myself. On the other hand, was it a state of dreaming or was it my huge imagination that was taking over? In which case I would not be in control. How had I managed to stay in control in my last dream of Ricky?

An idea slowly began to form in my head. I knew from experience that it might be better planned than enacted. I had decided that the next time I saw Ricky or Candle Face, I would try to keep my thoughts and feelings under control. I would fight back. After all, Mrs. Hemenis had tutored me about the correctness of this. It had worked in the long run. There was no harm in that. I would have to live through to adulthood, in the same way that I had lived to be eleven years old.

I would be in control. I would fight back and I would defend myself as only I knew how. I had also come across Luke 24:39 when I had skimmed through the Bible in Michael’s house. I had worked it out. My mind was somewhat at peace. I did not have to be afraid of going to sleep.

This decided, I actually looked forward to going to sleep over the next couple of nights. Things stayed quiet. I would drift off to sleep but a part of my mind told me that I would like to see Ricky and Candle Face. I began to sleep well for the first time in weeks if not months.

For the next few nights, I challenged Ricky and Candle face to show themselves. I told myself that I had made the mistake of jumping in the hole in the empty lot next door and had disturbed Candle Face at night. Nothing could be worse and I could not undo that action. But if I wanted, I could walk into the empty lot next door and jump into the hole again. I was waiting for Candle Face to be disturbed. I was waiting for her to reappear.

I started going to bed early. I would need the hours of the night if either Ricky or Candle Face or both were going to come to me in my room. There would be a lot to do, besides getting some hours of sleep before I had to head off to school the next morning.

On this one night, sleep eluded me. I got up, walked out and sat in the living room. My mother had been here in the living room earlier. Now my parents had gone to sleep in their room. I was prepared with my plans. I was not afraid.

Soon enough I thought I could hear someone knocking on the outside door between the front porch and my bedroom. My heart started to pound but I told myself that I should not worry. It was just someone knocking on my room door. I walked into my room to see that the door knob was being turned from the outside. Again, I steadied myself as I told myself not to worry just because someone was trying to turn the outside doorknob.

The door was locked. I told myself I was safe. I could be safe in my house if I wanted. I did not have to go to Michael’s house. Now I heard a hoarse, rough voice say, “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” I knew that voice. It was the voice of was Candle Face.

I was in a dreamlike state. I walked away from the door to the front porch, but willed myself to go back into the living room. I told myself that I was having yet another new experience. Back in the living room I could see that I was looking at myself lying on the couch. I told myself that I was sleeping and I was dreaming. It was a real live dream.

In a way it set my mind at rest. Knowing that I had to be dreaming reassured me. It was the answer to my unanswerable queries to myself and it gave me the best feeling in the world at that moment. I felt like I was in complete control of my life for the first time. I felt my body lift off the floor and I found myself going in the direction I wanted to. I was flying, but it was purposeful movement.

“Go right. Go left. Go down.” I directed my newly flying self. I could slowly fly in any direction. I willed myself to go further into the living room.

I could control my dream state. I heard Candle Face again. She was scratching at the living room window screens as she had done long ago, without success. Her aim was to tear the screen. I remembered that time and felt confident that she would not be able to enter this time either. I had stayed out of her reach then because I had been able to act quickly. I could do it again. I could see her nails and palms leaving smears on the screens on the window. I looked carefully and we suddenly make eye contact. That is, I looked at the sockets of her cloudy face.

It unnerved me. I could feel my control slipping. Her lips moved into a sort-of smile. She said, “There you are!” I did not want to be her long lost friend. But unfortunately it broke the feel-good spell for me. My doubts came flooding back. It had taken just that one hypnotic look. Once I saw her I was scared all over again.

I had failed and I was falling. “I can’t fight her. I can’t,” was the thought that flooded my consciousness. I held on to the little courage I had and automatically rushed to the window to shut it. But it was not going to be as before, the time I had managed to shut the screens one by one and had kept her out. By the time I got to the window she had already ripped the screen off.

She headed to the next window. I beat her to that one and managed to close that window. We carried on like this for the row of outside windows. But now I could hear her going to the back porch screen door. That was the one she had started with, the last time. I rushed to slide the backdoor chain lock in, but she was wily and she had had practice in being sly.

Candle Face had been able to open the door an instant before I could lock it. Her entire right arm and right leg had snaked around the door inside the house. I pushed against the door with whatever strength I had. I was pushing against Candle Face. I was fighting back in the only way I knew. Would it be enough to stop her?

I did not know the answer to that as yet. Because Candle Face was fighting back as well. Her arm was inside. She was using it as best as possible, to scratch and flail at me however she could. Her scratches burnt. They felt like fire.

I did not know whether I would be able to withhold her onslaught. I knew that I was at my wits’ end. At this instant I heard the front door slam shut. If Ricky were going to join her in fighting me, I knew what the outcome would be. No matter what Mrs. Hemenis had taught me, this was going to be the end of me. I knew Ricky was coming in from the front and that I would be sandwiched in the middle between the two ghouls.

At the same time, I had no option but to fight. But how was I going to manage that? I had never been in a real fight. My friends and I may have grappled in a mock wrestling match, but that was about how far it went. I had punched the sixteen year old boy outside Mrs. Hemenis’, but he had reacted as though those were minor stings, not real punches. How did real people throw their punches?

There was a feeling that someone was close behind me. I looked back. I saw Ricky standing within inches of my face. He had a rope in his hand. Out of the corner of my eyes I could see my body still sleeping on the couch. I was in deep sleep and contented.

My philosophical reasoning came back in a flash. “That’s it! I am dreaming. I know this and knowing this, I can control this dream.” I thought to myself. It was as though my mind was on two levels – one was the dreaming, sleeping self. I was grappling with Ricky and Candle Face on another level.

I looked back at Ricky. He was busy as he prepared a noose with the rope. Ricky did not speak when he was busy when he was alive and he did not speak now. If I had seen Ricky when I had forgotten to control my dream, had he appeared only because I had expected him when the front door had been shut? Candle Face was still where she had been, still trying to claw her way in.

Mrs. Hemenis’ teachings now came to me without any effort on my part. I would have to carry on defending myself. I also remembered back to the time when Frank had saved Ricky from Carlos down at the creek. Ricky had refused to defend himself the time before. Someone had to do it.

Those may have been easier times, when Ricky had been alive. If it was possible for an eleven year old to be nostalgic, I was just that. I longed for that time in this difficult instant. “I wish Frank was here to fight for me,” was what I said to myself. Some wishes work for anyone. This one worked for me.

In an instant Ricky disappeared and Frank appeared. But I knew better than blindly thinking that it was a miracle. “That’s it. I’m in control again,” I knew. I was working harder on my dream. I let go of the door and stepped back because I knew what was going to happen next. The door was flung open as if from an assault. Candle Face had been trying with all her might and this had to happen. She rushed in, but came to an abrupt halt.

She looked straight at me and then looked at Frank. She actually looked confused and I wondered, not for the first time, whether I had all my facts at my fingertips. Did she expect to see Ricky instead? And since it was now Frank that she saw, how *did* she relate to Dennis and Frank?

I was wary all over again. My best option would be to plunge in. Whatever Frank thought of her, I would have to do my best to get him on my side. I would have to show him just how I felt. I looked at Frank and said, “Frank, this bitch is trying to kill me.” He turned to face her. Candle Face dropped her arms to her side as if *she* was now paralyzed.

“I’ll take care of it.” Frank said. He had said something to this effect, if not in these exact words when he had taken on Carlos for Ricky. Frank raised his right arm and cocked it back. He proceeded to punch her right in the face. She flew straight out of the kitchen through that door which had seen so much struggle. She flew onto the back porch. She attempted to get up and run. Could I think back to times when I wished I could have done this in her presence?

Frank approached her and said, “If you ever come back, I will do it again. You will have to face the same humiliation” Candle Face should have known better, but she began to screech and squeal. Something else happened, which had last happened on the first night when she had been disturbed. Eric’s dog and my neighborhood dogs began to bark. The barking was coming from afar and from near.

I could nearly not believe it, but *she* was now scared. It was nearly funny as I watched her claw her way back out of the back porch screen door with nearly as much vigor as she had clawed her way in. She slithered down the steps, ran to the fence between our house and the empty lot and jumped over it. Frank and I watched her flight back as she dived into the hole in the empty lot next door.

Whether it was me or my dream self, I smiled and I turned to face Frank. I wanted to thank him for being my protective elder brother, as he had been with Ricky. But Frank was not there. I pinched myself. I wanted to wake up, but I did not. I tried to stomp on one foot with the other, but I stayed put where I was.

I remembered that I had been flying around at some point. I looked at the couch but I could no longer see my sleeping body.

Again, the front door opened and slammed shut. What now? I took a few steps to the side and stood against the wall. I was ready to fight or to flee, if I had to. I needed to know what was in store for me now. It was Frank. He looked at me and asked what I was up to. I had been through a long battle, was truly exhausted and in any case, did not know what kind of an explanation was required of me. I just shrugged my shoulders.

Frank and I walked into the living room towards each other. We sat down on the couch. We sat there and talked for an hour. We talked about the time when Frank had fought for Ricky in the creek. He said he felt good doing that and said he would do it again if he had to.

Little did he know that he just had, but for me this time. I slept well that night. When Mom woke me up the next morning, she gave me a little cuddle. She said that I was growing up too fast and would no longer remain the baby of the family.

But I knew enough to know this.

**Chapter 39**

After that twin onslaught from Ricky and Candle Face, Ricky’s disappearance and Candle Face’s retirement, I never saw them again. When I reflect on this, I know that I had not only managed to get on top of what was happening around me, but I also managed to stay in control of my life.

In fact I never had a dream about Ricky after this. I visited his grave every week or so, but did not hear his voice for real either. I saw no signs of him anywhere, except for the black metal cross hung to commemorate him and any other children who might have died.

Ricky’s bed stayed in my room and his books in which he scribbled his compositions stayed where they were, undisturbed. I never again saw his toys which had disappeared on the day he died.

Sure enough, our friends missed him. People in school still talked about Ricky. I missed him. Or at least I missed the thirteen year old brother I would have liked to have. I let myself dream about what he would have been like in the next couple of years and as an adult. I talked to Eddie about this. Eddie and I had a great many concerns to share and confidences to sort out. I started talking to Shelia about Ricky too, but could see that she could become distressed on occasion. When this happened, Shelia would dab her eye and pat my shoulder. She said she could not wait for me to reach adulthood. She had more to tell me.

The other fact was that I never saw Candle Face again either. Even in the days and weeks after that last bitter battle with her, I somehow knew that I would never see her again. The dream-like state in which I had watched her disappear over the fence and scramble back to her hole in the back lot next door, held in real life. She was not going to emerge from there ever again…..or maybe on just one occasion which I have to tell you about.

I was no longer scared to go to sleep. I looked forward to sleep and my rightful rest since that day when I had willed Frank to come to my rescue. I would never know to what extent Anthony’s death and then Ricky’s was tied to Candle Face’s emergence and visits after that. There was much about Ricky’s death that would remain unexplained forever.

Griffin seemed to have had enough even before Ricky died. I do not know if Ricky saw him in those last few weeks. I had not seen him in the last month before Ricky’s death, and I did not see him now or ever again. Still later, one of our friends from South Austin would give me some surprising news which I would try and understand. I would try to see if I could tie up the information with what I knew about Griffin.

I took to paying attention in class and was even surprised when I began to appreciate what I was being taught. I can say that I was taking a genuine interest. No one was forcing me to do anything.

Shelia finally mentioned that our teachers had told her that I was doing better class work and even doing my home work as expected. Shelia started to take more of an interest in my life in school, my school work. She could talk to me without any boundaries and barriers. She could even talk to me about my disasters.

I now felt that Frank was there for me at home, or even close by. I no longer had to sleep with the light on. I even look forward to my dream-filled sleep. I felt that I had nothing to be afraid of. The fact of my being in control of my life was true for my dreams. I had no more monsters to contend with.

It was not smooth sailing all the way. My life had its ups and downs. Unfortunately my mother and step-father divorced soon after Ricky’s suicide. Frank, Shelia and I stayed on for a bit in our little house on Ben Howell Drive. I did not tell Shelia this, but I missed Raymond a great deal. I missed his company when I watched TV. I gradually watched TV less and less, and then not at all, except on weekends.

Raymond had sustained my interest in running. It was going to be a lifelong interest. I carried on running and I carried on winning. I would always love to run. I kept my trophies and held on to my records for many years. I like to think that one or two of my best records have still not been beaten.

Austin and South Austin were visited by twisters on and off. They were frequent and occasionally worse during hot summers. People close to us lost a roof, but I would never forget the excitement of running down to Stacey Lane the day the tornado hit. No one stayed out during these storms as Ricky had in the summer of my eleventh year. However, people had heard about how Ricky had prayed through the hailstorm that summer and they did occasionally pray for the storm to pass.

Everyone that I knew graduated from high school. I knew I wanted to be in the army. All of us chose our professions. Eddie did well and so did Dennis and Frank, though Dennis spent some years at a correctional facility as a teenager.

I did not like to visit him there but Shelia persevered. Surprisingly, so did Raymond, even after my parents divorced. Dennis and his girlfriend stayed true to each other through all this and Dennis and Frank got married to their girlfriends who used to live up our street.

Frank grew to excel in music with his lyrics, songwriting and general interest in music. He was also going to have academic success in popularizing his brand of philosophical and humanitarian issues. I give him the respect due to a wise older brother. I finally got my courage up when I was a teenager, to ask Dennis and Frank why they had done what they had done to Ricky on the day they had sniffed paint under our house. Dennis said he could not remember it at all. Frank, who I thought was more under the influence on the day, said that it would remain the most regrettable action of his life. I suppose we all have our regrets, even now.

My mother and I moved to another part of town after Dennis and Frank married and moved out. I decided to go back to my birth name ‘Arthur’ instead of my nickname ‘Ray,’ given by Raymond. ‘Arthur’ is what my wife, my family and my friends and colleagues call me now.

After the first couple of years of missing him dreadfully, I initiated contact with my step-father Raymond. When I visited him I noticed that he tended to sit down in front of the TV with me. We managed to carry on with our great relationship. I still consider him my father instead of my step-father.

Raymond discussed his own regrets and failures with me. He told me about the fact that he could not read or write. I was surprised, because I would never have guessed had he not told me. It did tie up with other facts when I thought about this. I will always remember how he had refused to read Ricky’s poems and his stories.

The next time I visited him we went along to the local education centre. Raymond put himself down for adult literacy classes. He had carried on going to the lessons and Raymond is now also internet and e-mail savvy. We send each other brief messages on the net.

**Chapter 40**

It has been a long time since 1985 when I was eleven, when I was at a disadvantage for being the youngest, when I was visited first by Candle Face and then by Ricky when he died.

I have thought a lot about Ricky and Candle Face since those last sightings of them. What I have not revealed is that I talked to my childhood friends about those happenings and still talk about it with them whenever I visit Austin.

I talked about all that to my wife in the early Autumn of 1999, just before I left for Kosovo. Whoever I have talked to always listens closely and at the end of the story wonders aloud whether Candle Face was real. I do too. Was Candle Face real?

Another thing – everyone I have talked to say that they cannot get the story and its details out of their head. I had spoken to my wife. She said she was annoyed in 1999, especially since it all came out when I was about to go off on my line of duty. She said that it seemed to occupy much of her consciousness, something she could have done without just then. She kept thinking about it, she said. Still some years later my wife suggested that I write a book about my ordeal.

We talked about it. A couple of friends, and now my wife, had heard my story by 2003. It had gripped everyone’s imagination and seemed to have affected them deeply. My wife, of course, felt that a great story would make a great book. We talked some more about it. My wife advised me to account for all events as accurately as possible. Doing so, she said, may turn out to be therapeutic for me.

She elaborated. I had buried the story twice, she said. The first time I had ‘forgotten’ for some seven years. A small sign had triggered my memory and I had been able to relate it in full, but had lost a friend because it was so real. The second time, I had convinced my wife, but both of us wanted to know if Candle Face was for real. I was no longer eleven and I would never go back to being eighteen. I was nearly thirty years old, but I still had to get to the truth.

I finally decided to put my ordeal on paper while I went back to Korea. This time my family came – my wife and my children. But nearly twenty years had passed and I found that I needed help. In fact the help I needed would fill a research dossier. I decided to call Robert in South Austin for help.

Robert now lived in his parents’ huge house on the same street on Ben Howell Drive. He could still see a house where my old house had been, catty corner from his. He could probably also see the empty lot from his house, if it was still an empty lot. At age thirty two, he was no longer the child who paid heed to odd stories. He would be able to find out if a house had really burnt down before I, and my family moved in. I called Robert and asked him a couple of questions.

I had met Robert half a dozen times after my mother and I moved away and also after I had graduated. He knew what I was talking about. Robert remembered about that empty lot and the hole in the back all of us took pains to avoid. He remembered what had been said about one or more children perishing in a house fire there before my time. I had told him a little about my experiences in 1985. Robert assured me that he would go to the local library and research the local microfiles for any evidence that could have been reported in the local papers when that fire took place.

As we talked on the phone, Robert gave me information about something that was very important to me.

“Hey Ray (my childhood friends still call me Ray), not only is your old house gone and another one there, but there is now another house in our empty lot.” We reminisced about how we still thought about it as our lot because we had played in it and could only think about it as ours. But Robert was going on, “Someone bought the land and built a house there. They built the house about three years ago.”

I asked, “Do they know the local gossip, the history of the place?”

He responded, but only after the slightest hesitation, “I don’t think so.”

I was back to thinking and wondering. If there had been a cover up, why had it been made? The most reasonable answer, of course, was that the property people would not want the local rumors to affect price of that one lot. They did not want it to drop below market value. But a niggling thought kept popping up in my head. Could they have not wanted to scare the new buyers? And what could the buyers be likely to be worried about?

**Chapter 41**

As I said, I have traveled around quite a bit. I was serving in Iraq when I got a Red Cross message. As an overseas personnel, I had to call the installation operators. They gave me the news that my birth father had been found dead in his home. He had been married to my mother during the years when she had Ricky and me. Ricky had passed away over fifteen years ago, so I was his only kin.

I was permitted leave from the army for a death in the family. I flew back to Germany where my wife was managing with the boys. I collected them and headed back to the United States, to Texas.

By that time my mother had moved out of Austin and was living in Temple, Texas. We had arranged that my kids would stay with her while my wife and I traveled to Pleasanton where my father had lived and died. I would say my own little prayer for the soul of my natural father. We would deal with the arrangements for the funeral among his friends there.

We stayed on in Temple for a day or two with my mother to settle the children with her. I was glad for the time I had on my hands because I had not seen my mother for a few years. We took up where we had left off, talking about our lives when I was a child and even later. She was now able to talk at length about Ricky.

I knew I was broaching a topic new to her, but I would have to tell her sometime. I told her about the dreams I used to have about Candle Face. I thought I would have to explain a lot, but she easily remembered the talk about the house fire next door before we had come to live on Ben Howell Drive. I also spoke to her about the dreams I had about Ricky soon after he died. My mother seemed to understand about that, as well.

My wife looked our way as we chatted for half the day. She knew what was being said and she knew that it would take time. It had taken me all this time to bring up the topic and how it had affected me directly. I was telling my mother about my nightmares and about the real events for the first time.

I was surprised that Shelia took it all in her stride. She was not surprised. She said she had her own story to tell.

She went back to the day of Ricky’s funeral. She asked me if I remembered how she had stayed in her room while everyone was waiting. She said that she could not walk out of her room because she had a sense of Ricky’s presence. She could hear his voice. It was his voice, though it was faint. She felt that he was calling out to her to save him. He had told her that he had made a mistake and that he did not want to be buried.

I was back in my eleven year old self when she told me this. I remembered it clearly. How on that very day I had gone around to the side of my house, the side we shared with Eric’s house. I remembered seeing Ricky clearly at my mother’s bedroom window and the gestures he had made and how Eric had also been convinced.

I had walked up to her bedroom to see if Ricky wanted me there. I told my mother about my excuse when she saw Eric and me hanging around, looking scared and unsure. I had asked my mother if she wanted anything.

She now told me that she too had been scared. She did not want to bury her son if he did not want it for himself. Of how relieved she had been when she saw Eric and me standing by her door. How she had realized that she had to get ahead with what she had to do. She said that the sight of Eric and me was the moment when her doubts vanished.

I knew that this was a story that we should have come around to. I was glad that we were talking now. It fitted in with my visit to the cemetery and what I felt Ricky had said to me, first from his casket, and then directly, when I had released him. Ricky’s presence had come back. My mother and I could confirm this. Eric could, too.

But this was not the only time that my experience had coincided with my mother’s. There was more to her story. Shelia told me that Ricky had also visited her a few days after his funeral. Being an adult, she knew now that it was his ghost she was seeing. My mother had seen Ricky’s ghost a fortnight or so after his funeral. She said that Ricky walked up to her while she was sitting in the living room and had sat on her lap. He looked sad, but told her that she must not take the responsibility for his death on herself. He had had time to dwell on it and it was his decision. He had then said to her,

“Ma, everything is going to be OK.”

My mother’s story was a revelation to me. Because Ricky *had* been right. Things were okay after this. I told my mother that this must have been on the day of my last nightmare. I told her that I was sure of it. Now that I had verbalized what I had thought of as a secret, I had found that my mother and I could account for events that had taken place at the same time. We could also talk about how correct our experiences and observations had been.

Both of us found now found some peace. We knew what we had seen and maybe what we might have imagined. It gave me a little more courage. It gave me the courage to think about my birth father and his life. We were going to give him a good funeral in the next couple of days.

**Chapter 42**

You may think that this section is a stream of incomplete and unorganized thoughts. I do too. I suppose I just got a bit impatient while I was waiting for my friend Robert to complete his research. He has been going over things quite meticulously. Robert has already sent me a great deal of relevant information. I am impatient for the rest of it.

About my first phone call to Robert and his first reply — Robert called me back and let me know about my initial queries. There had been a fire that had destroyed a house. He confirmed that the house had stood on what we called the empty lot. Robert had also found out that our empty lot was only half of that first lot.

My parents Raymond and Shelia had bought the other half and bought the house separately. Our house had been put in position on the empty half lot. I remember my parents telling us this at the dinner table when I was young. Another house stood on it now.

Then, there was only one child who was killed in the house fire. It was not a girl, good or bad, little or slightly older, like the Candle Face in my dreams. The child who died was a three year old boy. I had heard this mentioned. That mention had come from the ghoul who terrorized me. Candle Face had brought it up. She had claimed that the little boy had been her brother in real life.

So who *was* Candle Face?

Robert had more to tell me about the house fire. The family had managed to escape as the house burnt down. They had initially run out with their little boy. He was found back in the house. He was found dead. The family later said that the little boy had said something about having left his toy cars behind.

They had been busy outside, after their narrow escape and did not notice that the boy had somehow made it back into the house. When he realized that his child was missing and may have gone back in to retrieve his toys, the father ran into the house after him but could not find him. The man had to retreat in the face of the inferno. A fireman found the little boy’s body behind the water heater the next day after the fire had been doused.

There was no little girl. Candle Face could not have been. Yet I had more or less known how the boy had died. I had known because Candle Face, who claimed to have also died in the house fire and claimed to be the boy’s slightly older sister, had told me.

Robert had just confirmed that it was a little boy who had died. On another level Candle Face, who could not have existed, and Ricky, who had, had both been attached to kind, good-hearted, knowledgeable Griffin.

Griffin was the boy who had died in a house fire on the empty lot next door.

We – Ricky and I, had heard a garbled version about the toy cars in his possession from Anthony. Anthony had also died fifteen years ago. If he had those same toys in his possession years after the inferno, how *had* they come to him? They could not have been handed down through another child, as Anthony had claimed.

According to the digging around that Robert had done, Candle Face was not real. But it was Candle Face who had given me information about events in the future which came horribly true. How could she not be true when the events were?

I reminded myself about Michael’s mother, Mrs. Romo and how she had found a way to answer problems. I had tried her methods. The answer I had received from the Bible was that ghosts were not real. It had helped me stay in control back then. Yet the untrue ghost had introduced Griffin and she had been truthful about him. .

He had been taught to read and write. He had taken himself to the school library and knew everything there was to know without having actually attended class.

Candle Face had revealed her inadequate form to me, while Griffin had revealed himself to Ricky and not always to others. I would have to bury my memory of tiny palm prints on windows, on the window screens and on the back window of my 1979 hatchback. I do not know how I will manage my reaction to tiny palm prints if I ever see them.

Coming back to the here and now, it means that for me, Robert’s investigations will lead to more questions. The mystery of Anthony’s toy cars may remain just that. Griffin had gone back into the house for his toy cars. But those must have been burnt to cinders.

The fact of Griffin, however, could not be researched any further. I have to research Griffin’s stories, to find the truth in them.

Robert’s digging revealed something even more interesting.

According to city records, the house that I grew up in *was not* built on the lot that it is on today. The house WAS built several miles away and moved to Ben Howell Drive in South Austin in the 1970s.

This confirmed the story of that teenager, the young girl who had come over to the house one morning. I had showed her around the house while she explained how it had been when she had lived in it.

Now, for what I had mentioned I was impatient about. My friend Robert is researching the history of my old house. He has even found who it belongs to now – a woman in her late thirties. She has a large family.

She has told Robert that she intends her children to grow up as happy as she had been when she had lived in the house when it had been hers and before it was bought. She has told Robert that she has the whole story, since she had lived there when she was little. He intends to interview her again and do a thorough research. She does not know what I know, that only I know what took place in that house when it was bought by my family. And that I have that part of the story.

I think that might help me write another book. I must talk to a couple of people. I am sure my wife will come up with her own observations. Robert will help, I know. I must try and trace some of the others from our old group of friends. The next bit will be true, too.

It is a pity that all that information turned out to be true when the being who divulged them was not real. I know she can no longer be watching and waiting. At least, I hope so.

**Chapter 43**

My last vision of Ricky and Candle Face had taken place years before my graduation. I had been a puny eleven year old at the time. Ricky had died a week or two before that. I had the pleasure of seeing Frank punch Candle Face during the summer of 1985.

Once I settled down to life without Ricky and without Candle Face I seemed to bury those memories in some deep place. It only came back to me years later when I was forced to acknowledge what had happened. You can say that I received one small sign some seven years later. When it came back to me I told myself that I had not forgotten. I had only suppressed the memory of that whole ordeal for several years.

I was forced to acknowledge all this only in 1991 when I thought I had finished with all matters connected with my childhood. I was still in Austin and it was the night of my high school prom.

The prom was over and it was the end of an evening of dancing, fun and wanting to remember high school. We were eighteen or so and on the threshold of adulthood. We could not wait for life to begin. I was going to work and study some more, then sign up with the army. I was on top of the world.

It happened out of the blue as I was driving my prom date back home in my old and ancient 1979 Toyota Corolla Hatchback. I was proud of my car and had earned it through a night time job. My date lived way out in the country. It was late and dark but I knew my way around and was enjoying the drive. There were few street lights along the long country road. When I drove under one of the street lights, I looked in the rearview mirror to see if I could observe any traffic behind me.

It was just a glance in the mirror. My senses acknowledged what my memory was still struggling to place. The tiny hairs all over my body alerted me before my brain did. I was looking through the mirror at a small hand print on the hatchback window of the car. My next thought was that I was going to veer of the road, despite my pride in my driving capabilities.

When I swerved my date must have thought I had fallen asleep at the wheel because of the hours of merriment. I had to assure her quickly that I was very much there. We drove away from the light which had highlighted that one palm print on the back window of my car. There was going to be a long dark stretch before the next street light. I put my foot down on the accelerator and sped up. I wanted to get to the next street light quickly. I wanted to check on what I had just seen.

There was no getting away. I saw the hand print again. I was looking out for it and saw it clearly this time as I drove underneath the next street light.

The memory of that summer of 1985 was still taking its time to register. I skipped the details and went straight to the main fact. “She’s back,” I recall thinking. I pulled over to the side of the road underneath the next street light. I hopped out of the car and walked to the back of the car. I had given no explanation to the girl in the car. I had to urgently check what my eyes were telling me. Night had fallen a long time ago but light flooded us in a large circle. I could see the hand print as good as day.

My date must have been aware that something had happened and that I was acting strangely. She stayed in the car as she followed me with her eyes, turning around to see where I was going. I used my hand to swipe at the hand print. I had not reckoned for it to be there at this time and I wanted it wiped off. The small hand print did not smear or smudge or show up any less. I must have been a little frightened but my brain was moving fast. I had to know.

I had to get the handprint off that glass. I had to know where it had come from. Was it on the outside and could it not be erased? There was only one way of finding out. I bent down and opened the hatchback. My date was still staring at me, trying to figure out what I was doing and why. I was reaching for that accursed hand print with my bare palm. I swiped at it from the inside of the pane. The hand print smeared.

Why had it been made from the inside of my car? Who had made it and who had been in there? Again, I had a sense of not being able to believe what I was looking at. I told myself that my eyes could not lie. It had to be true. My heart began to beat just as hard as it used to when I was a kid and had landed myself in some disaster.

 My date looked scared as well. She could obviously not figure out why I had to keep wiping a smudge on the car window way past midnight. She kept asking what I was doing. But my mind was still racing and I was too preoccupied to answer.

I knew that there was too much pouring into my head and that I could not sort this out just now. My other worry was – what if *she* was around here? My first instinct was to get out of the way. It was late and I had no cover. I left the slightly smudged handprint alone and ran back to the driver’s door and got back into the car.

I had been quiet all along and could still not say anything by way of explanation. I started the car and began to drive away. My date in the meanwhile had carried on asking what all that had been about. She was persistent.

Sights and sounds now came spilling back to me. Everything was there, waiting to be found. There was just one thing I could do, to explain my shock and my bizarre behavior. I pulled over to the side under another street light. I told her the whole story right in the middle of the small country road — and in the middle of the night. She never asked me about it again.

The downside was that not only did she not ask any more questions, but the story seemed to make her more frightened than I was, in telling it. In fact, the girl never spoke to me again.

I am not sure how that hand print got there. When I thought about it the next morning with a clear head, I did not think that it was Candle Face leaving a little sign again, as she used to. But when I went out to investigate that hand print now smudged, on the back window of my cherished car, I was not sure. I thought otherwise.

Maybe she was just letting me knew that she is still around — dormant — and waiting!