

Bill Jackson, Astronaut by Roland Foster

Astronaut Bill Jackson waited by the shuttle's airlock as the pilot matched orbits with the space station. He reseated the hook-and-loop fastenings of the straps of his equipment pack—it wouldn't do to have something come loose during his mid-course correction. He tensed muscles tuned to spring-steel hardness by his months and years of training. His mission was critical. He was ready.

The old gray Metro bus came to a screechy halt at the bus stop. The back door opened with a jerky double thump as the spaceman's powerful leg muscles launched him through the opening. He applied full steering jets for a quick turn to get lined up with the shuttle's orbit, cut in the rocket boosters and sped back to the corner, meanwhile checking for traffic so he wouldn't have to slow down crossing the intersection. Halfway across the street he applied his mid-course correction and hit the boosters again. Speeding diagonally across the vacant lot with screaming jets, he extended his wings. (Wings don't do anything in space, of course, but flying always feels more satisfying with them extended.) He checked his scanners for space pirates, but today there weren't any, which was good because he was in a hurry.

Approaching the station, he was pleased to notice that the Station Commander had the outer airlock door open. That would save precious seconds. He retracted his wings, waited until the last possible instant, then applied his braking jets at full power. Bursting through the space station's inner airlock door, he came to a perfectly balanced halt.

Grandma, stirring a pot of greens on the back burner of the gas stove, shook her head and scolded, "My heavens, Billy, how many times have I told you not to come tearing through the door that way! You nearly frighten the life out of me!" She smiled as she said it, so he knew she wasn't really angry.

"Hi, Gramma!" said the astronaut, panting only slightly. Eleven-year-olds don't get very winded from running only two blocks, even at full booster power. "How you doin' today? Got any cookies?"

"Which are you more concerned about, my health or my cookies?" asked Grandma. Her smile was still there, but it was pretending to be a stern frown.

Billy hesitated a second, then said, "Your cookies." He grinned as he said it, but Grandma's frown got darker. "Aw, Gramma," said Billy, "You know I'm only kiddin'." Laying his backpack on the enamel-top table, he went and put his arms around his grandmother's waist and laid his head on her shoulder. He was just a few inches shorter than her slender five feet four. "I love you, Gramma Sadie," he crooned. "I'd love you even if you didn't make the best chocolate-chip cookies in the whole universe." After a few seconds Billy, without raising his head, said, "But have you got any cookies?"

Grandma laughed, gave him a squeeze and then a spank, and said, "Put your books in the living room and wash your face and hands, and I'll see."

“All *right!*” Billy grabbed his backpack and vanished through the inner doorway that led to the rest of Grandma’s little house. He was back seconds later, hands empty and slightly damp.

“Sit down, Billy,” said Grandma, placing a plate of warm, fragrant cookies on the table. “That was a world’s record for the quickest wash ever, I expect. Did you hang up the towel nice and straight?”

“My hands weren’t very dirty, and yes’m, I hung the towel up just right.” Billy polished off a cookie in two bites, and reached for another.

“Slow down, child!” admonished Grandma as she poured a glass of cold milk and placed it in front of him. “There’s no fire to get to that I know of.” She turned off the burner and sat down across a corner from Billy. “How’s your mother?”

Billy grinned, and took a smallish bite of his second cookie. “She’s okay. She said she’d be here about six. Ol’ Darryl’s bringin’ her. You remember Darryl?”

“Maybe. Is he that young man she’s been seeing for the last six months or so? Kind of flashy-looking? I’ve seen him once or twice.”

“Yes ma’am, that’s him. I think Mama can’t decide if she really likes him. I like him okay. He’s pretty cool. He gives me a dollar sometimes for shinin’ his shoes.” Billy munched thoughtfully and took a swallow of milk. “Darryl and me are sort of buddies. I mean Darryl and *I*. He talks to me and tells funny stories, and we kid each other a lot, and he brings ice cream sometimes for Mama and me. I’ve been for a ride in his car a few times. It’s a Toyota 4-Runner! Man, is it ever cool!”

“Oh, my! A 4-Runner!” smiled Grandma.

“Yeah! Ol’ Darryl’s not too happy right now, though. There’s a new man that’s took up with Mama lately.”

“*Taken*. You know how to speak correctly. I want you to do it, you hear me?” Grandma’s school teacher background was often in evidence.

“Yes ma’am. Anyway, this new guy, his name is Andrew somethin’. I think Mama’s kinda sweet on him already.”

“How long has he been coming around?”

“A week or so. I’ve only seen him a couple times. I don’t think I like him all that much.”

“What’s wrong with him? Has he got leprosy? Does he smell bad?”

Billy swallowed a gulp of milk, and laughed into his milk glass. “No. But he walks with a limp. An’ I think he’s, like, poor, you know ...”

“You don’t need the word *like* in that sentence! You’d better speak proper English, William James Jackson Junior, or I’ll have your hide for a wall hanging! The Lord gave you an *excellent* mind—you can be an astronaut or anything you want to be. But if you insist on talking like an ignoramus, folks will think you’re as dumb as you sound!”

“Yes, ma’am, I know, I just forgot. One thing about Andrew, when he talks, he speaks pretty good English. Better than Darryl. You’d have ol’ Darryl’s hide nailed on the wall in two minutes flat!”

“Okay. I’m beginning to like Andrew. Why do you think he’s poor?”

“Cause I asked him if he’d pay me a dollar for shinin’ his shoes, like Darryl does, and he just shook his head and said somethin’ about they didn’t need it, but they did. An’ he always wears the same dopey clothes—blue pants, white shirt, and a maroon tie, like some kind of a dopey uniform, ’cept I don’t think it is.” He took

another bite of cookie. “Ol’ Darryl is a way cool dresser. He’s got a ton of neat clothes.”

“Sounds to me like being compared to Darryl would be sort of hard on just about anybody. What else do you know about Andrew?”

Billy chewed and swallowed a bite of cookie. “Well, as I was saying, he limps. And he squints, too, sometimes, like maybe it hurts him to walk.”

“Winces,” suggested Grandma. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, winces. And ’specially when he sits down or stands up.”

“Probably it does hurt. What else?”

“He doesn’t have a car; he rides the bus. An’ ... I don’t know what else. He’s kinda hard to talk to. He doesn’t tell stories or kid around, like Darryl does. He’s serious. And quiet.”

“Have you ever tried to have a conversation with him? Maybe he’s just shy.”

“No, ma’am, not really.”

“Maybe you should. Does your mother find him hard to talk with?”

“I don’t think so. But she talks a lot anyway; he doesn’t have to say very much.”

“That’s probably true. Now listen, Billy, I’m a little concerned about your values system.”

“My what?”

“Your values system. It means the things you think are important. You think Darryl is better than Andrew because Darryl has money, and nice clothes and a fancy car, and Andrew doesn’t.”

“I didn’t say he was *better*.”

“Yes, you did. You said Darryl was ‘cool,’ and that you don’t like Andrew because he limps and he’s quiet, and he doesn’t have much money and he dresses in dopey clothes. In your eyes, Darryl is a better person than Andrew. Right?”

“Umm—I guess so. ’Cept I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what you *meant*, and that’s what you believe.” She rubbed his curly head. “But those things—clothes, money, looks, even how a person talks—they don’t tell you whether or not that person is a good person. It’s *character* that’s important. Things like integrity, kindness, generosity, loyalty, responsibility, trustworthiness. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. You remember it. There’s an old saying that goes, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover.’ It means don’t judge anything, or anyone, by appearances. You need more than impressions, you need facts.”

“All right.”

“Tell you what. Next time you get a chance, you talk with Andrew and try to find out more about him. Find out why he walks with a limp, and what he does for a living. Not being nosy, but just having a conversation. Understand?”

Billy said, “I guess so.”

“You’d be surprised how people will open up if you show them that you’re interested in them. So give it a try with Andrew, and see what you come up with. That can be your assignment this week.” Grandma was a retired school teacher, and she sometimes gave Billy “assignments” beyond his regular 6th grade work.

“Okay.” Billy polished off the last of the cookies and milk. “Got any chores for me today?”

“Do you have any homework?”

“Nope. I did it all during Library. It was just a study period today.”

“That’s fine. We both seem to be caught up on our chores today. You want to read for a while?”

“Can I pick the book this time?”

“‘May I.’ Yes, you may. What do you have in mind?”

“*Gulliver’s Travels*. It’s neat. But you have to help me with the hard words, like that place with the giants, that *Brod...*”

“*Brobdingnag*. *Brobdingnag*. Take it slow, it sounds just like it ought to.”

Together they moved to the living room. Billy took *Gulliver’s Travels* from the bookshelf and opened it to a bookmark part way through. They sat side by side on the couch, and Billy began to read.

“Chapter eleven.’ No, it’s ‘Chapter two,’ because it’s Roman numerals. ‘On Display in the Market. My mistress had a daughter of nine years old ...’”

Billy read a whole chapter while Grandma looked on, then she read a chapter while he looked on, as was their custom. They had a dictionary handy, and they stopped a few times to look up “scurvy trick” and “cashiered,” and to discuss a half-dozen other archaisms without bothering to look them up.

At the end of Chapter III, Grandma carefully placed the bookmark in the book. “Time to stop. Your mother will be here in a few minutes. You can help me get some supper ready.”

“All right! Are we havin’ biscuits?”

“Of course.”

“Can I — *may* I make ‘em?”

“That would be a big help.” They rose, replaced the book and the dictionary carefully on the shelf, and went into the kitchen.

The biscuits got made, with a little help from Grandma and not much excess flour scattered about the kitchen, by the time Billy’s mother arrived. Sharon was tall, attractive but not beautiful, and not at all overweight, though she thought she was. “Hi, Buckshot,” she said, giving him a hug and rubbing his head. “Hi, Miss Sadie.” She kissed Grandma’s cheek. Grandma and Sharon got along very well, for the most part. They didn’t talk much about Billy’s father. Or about Sharon’s life style, for that matter.

“Your young man didn’t want to come in?” asked Grandma.

“I didn’t ask him. He was just droppin’ me off.”

“He’s welcome to come and have supper with us any time you want him to, you know that.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll ask him sometime. I don’t know if he’ll come.”

“Oh? Why wouldn’t he come? I’d like to meet him.”

“Why?” asked Sharon suspiciously.

“Oh, no special reason, I suppose, except that he’s a friend of yours. Is he nice?”

“Yes’m, he’s real nice. He and Billy get along real good, too.”

The supper of fried ham, greens, and biscuits with ham gravy tasted delicious, but neither of the ladies ate much of it. Grandma never ate much—she

said she just didn't need all that much food any more. Sharon was watching her weight, as usual, and just ate some greens and a dry biscuit. Billy probably ate as much as the other two put together.

After the meal, Grandma rose to clear the table.

"Let me help you with the dishes, Miss Sadie," said Sharon.

"My heavens, girl, I'm here in this house all day long with hardly anything to do, and you're out working your fingers to the bone. I can see how tired you are. You just relax, I can take care of the dishes. How about a cup of tea?"

"No, ma'am, thank you kindly anyway. We really ought to be goin'. I do thank you for the supper, and for lookin' after Billy so good, helpin' him with his readin' an' all. Is there anythin' you need tomorrow?"

"Not a thing, Sharon. You want supper here tomorrow night?"

"No, ma'am. We have somethin' planned. Besides, you've done fed us twice this week already."

"That doesn't matter. You're always welcome, you know that."

"Yes'm, I do. You know, I didn't get much of a husband when I married, but I sure got me a wonder of a mother-in-law."

"Now don't start"

"I know. I'm sorry. It just came out. I was tryin' to give you a compliment."

"I appreciate that, but you need to find a way of doing it without bad-mouthing my James. Especially in front of his son."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. I'm sorry. I'll ... try not to do it again. Get your books, Billy." Billy went to get his books from the living room. Sharon stepped forward and hugged Grandma. Tears glistened in both their eyes. "I do love you, you know, Miss Sadie. I..."

"Yes, I know, dear. I love you and Billy, too. More than you can possibly imagine. Don't you worry about imposing on me. I thank God every day that I see either one of you. Don't you dare think that any of it is ever a burden to me. It's pure joy."

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A few evenings later Billy was at the kitchen table at home, doing homework, when the doorbell rang. It was Andrew. Billy let him in, then went back to the kitchen. Andrew followed, limping slightly. His limp was more pronounced at some times than at others; tonight it hardly showed.

"Have a cup of coffee," said Billy.

"Thanks." Andrew got a cup from a cupboard and poured himself some coffee from the pot on the counter. It was cold, so he put it in the microwave and pressed a few buttons. The microwave made microwave noises. Andrew looked at the cup through the window. "Where's your mom?" he asked.

"In the tub. She said she needed a good long soak in a bubble bath."

"Hmm. How long has she been in there?"

Billy looked up at the clock. "Maybe a half hour."

"I'll just check on her," said Andrew. He walked through the tiny living room and stopped at the bathroom door. "Sharon?"

"Who is it?" she answered.

“Andrew. You okay?”

“Of course. I’ll be out in a little while. Have a cuppa coffee.”

“Okay.” He returned to the kitchen just as the microwave finished. He stilled its beeps by opening the door. He took the cup, closed the microwave, and started to leave the kitchen.

Billy had resumed working on his homework, but he suddenly remembered his assignment from Grandma. He looked up and said, “Andrew?”

“What?”

“Do you, uh, know anything about fractions?”

“Some. Why, are they giving you problems?” He smiled.

“A little bit. Hey, did you just make a joke?”

“A pretty feeble one, I’m afraid.” Andrew sat down at the table. “Let’s see what you’ve got.” He looked at Billy’s homework and at the math book. “Looks to me like you’re doing just fine.”

Billy pointed to a problem. “What about this one here, does that look right to you?”

“Yep. Right as rain.”

“‘Right as rain’—what does that mean?”

“It’s just an old expression. Something my grandmother used to say.”

“Was she nice?”

“My grandmother? Yes, she was great. Really great.”

“My grandma is great, too.”

“I know. Your mom tells me about her sometimes. It’s good of her to take care of you after school.”

“We kinda take care of each other. We have lots of fun together.”

Andrew looked at his hands and didn’t answer. Billy took a deep breath. “You mind if I ask you something?”

“Ask away,” answered Andrew.

“How come you limp when you walk?”

“Mmm. That’s a long story. I don’t like to talk about it much.”

“Oh,” said Billy. “Is it because it’s a ‘specially painful memory?’”

Andrew looked at Billy’s intent expression. “You really want to know, don’t you?” He sighed. “It’s painful, but mostly because it was such a stupid thing. I’m still bitter about it. It was so senseless.” Billy waited while Andrew made up his mind.

Andrew sighed. “It was a stupid fraternity initiation thing. Not even really bad hazing, just dumb. We had to pair off and join hands to make a four-hand lift, you know, like this—” He grasped one wrist with the other hand.

“Yeah, I know how to do that,” said Billy.

“The pledges—that’s the kids who are being initiated—the pledges had to carry each of the brothers the length of the porch. Of the fraternity house. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“This other kid and I, George Wallace was his name, can you believe that? Anyway, we were both skinny kids, and we wound up with this fat boy named Dennis, must have weighed at least 250. We started out okay, but about halfway down the porch I felt something give, and my right knee buckled. It hurt like—it hurt

a lot. I fell off the porch onto some concrete steps, and fat Dennis landed right on top of me. George may have landed on him, I don't know. I got smashed up pretty good, not even counting the knee, which was a disaster. As far as I know, Dennis and George didn't even get a bruise."

"Sheesh! How long were you in the hospital?"

"Weeks and weeks. Over six months, counting rehab."

"Does it still hurt a lot?"

"It varies. Most of the time I don't pay much attention to it. Sometimes it's a real drag."

"Bummer. It won't ever get any better?"

"No. Can we talk about something else now?"

"Yeah. What do you wanna talk about?"

"Anything." He drank a swallow of coffee. "How about your dad?"

"Umm. No, I don't want to talk about my father."

"Come on, fair is fair. And I need to know."

"Why?"

"Because I'm interested in your mom, and she's interested in me, but she won't talk about him."

"He's dead. Why don't you just leave it at that?"

"Because it's obvious that you've both been hurt pretty bad. I can see the scars. To put it in terms of my own situation, I can see you limping sometimes."

"Oh." He thought for several seconds, then sighed. "Well, you answered my question, so I guess I have to answer yours." He shook his head. "Okay. I don't know all the details, but I've listened to the grownups and I've thought about it a lot—an awful lot." He sighed again. "If I start to cry, I'm quittin', okay?"

"Just start. You'll do okay."

"Okay. My father—my Daddy—was the greatest. He'd come home from work and we'd grab a ball and some gloves and go to the park and play catch. I was only six or seven, and I was lousy at it, I couldn't throw *or* catch, but that didn't bother him. He always made it fun. We did it all summer.

"In the winter, any time it snowed we'd go sledding. He'd pull me up the hill on the sled, and then we'd ride down together. That was the coolest! And he taught me to ice skate, too.

"On nice Sundays we'd go on a picnic, the three of us. Sometimes we'd go to a movie. We were always doin' somethin' together. He loved to give us a good time.

"But Daddy was always broke, too. His job—he was a janitor at a school, I think—it didn't pay much, and he and Mama argued a lot about money. That's about all they ever argued about. They were happy otherwise, I think.

"One night Daddy was with a couple of his buddies. They had a car, and Daddy was drivin', for some reason. The friends said, 'Stop here,' and they went in a liquor store and pulled a gun and tried to rob the place. The store owner had a gun, too, and he opened fire. He shot both of Daddy's friends, but they shot him, too. One friend made it to the car and crawled in. Daddy hit the gas, and ran right into a police car that was just comin' around the corner.

"The store owner and both of Daddy's friends died. Daddy said he didn't know the other two were gonna rob the store, he didn't even know they had stolen

the car. The jury didn't believe him. I don't know if Mama believed him or not. I don't know if I do, either.

"Daddy went to prison for fifteen years. That was four years ago. Two years ago—" Billy swallowed and took a couple of deep breaths. "Two years ago he was knifed to death in a fight."

They sat silently for a while. Andrew shook his head. "You poor kid. What a rotten—"

"Never mind the 'poor kid' stuff. I don't need you to feel sorry for me." Billy knuckled a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Right. I should've said what you said. 'Bummer.'"

"Yeah. That's okay." They smiled at each other.

"Thank you for telling me. You okay on the fractions?" asked Andrew.

"Yeah. I didn't really need help. That was just to get you to sit down."

"That's what I thought." The smiles got bigger.

"What you two idiots grinnin' about?" asked Sharon as she came into the kitchen in her bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel.

"Nothing," replied Andrew and Billy simultaneously. They looked at each other, and did a high five.

Sharon grinned, too. "Well, I'm glad it takes so little to make y'all happy. How 'bout supper?"

"Supper is going to be pizza a la Andrew," said Andrew. "I'm celebrating. You tell me what you want and when you want it, and I'll call Domino's and have it delivered."

"Sounds good," replied Sharon. "What you celebratin'?"

"Let's just say—friendship."

Ninety minutes later, as the three sat at the kitchen table and considered having another slice of pizza, and if so, pepperoni or mushroom, the phone rang. Sharon answered it. It was Darryl, calling from his cell phone.

"Hey, Doll, what's shakin'?"

"Hey, Darryl. What you want?"

"What I want? I want you, Baby! Right now, after while, or any time!"

"I can't talk right now, Darryl. I got somebody here."

"That Andrew character? Tell him to go home. I wanna come over."

"Some other time, Darryl. Not tonight."

"Hey, Baby, what's wrong with you? This is ol' Darryl you givin' the cold shoulder to."

"Good night, Darryl. Call me tomorrow." She quietly hung up the phone.

"Yeah, baby, right. If I ain't too busy!" Darryl threw down the phone. "Stupid Andrew!"

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After that, Billy and Andrew were comfortable with each other. Having dealt with some tough subjects, they found they could discuss just about anything. They talked about Andrew's family, most of whom were in Texas, and his job. They spent

hours talking about Billy's plans to become an astronaut, the training he would have to undergo, and what he might find in outer space.

Andrew was impressed by the range of Billy's knowledge, thanks to his grandmother's dedicated tutelage. He was also astonished by the boy's maturity, in some ways far beyond his years, though with interesting little-boy gaps. For his part, Billy liked Andrew's easygoing manner and ready wit. He couldn't imagine why he hadn't liked Andrew at first. Andrew seemed like an entirely different person.

Darryl stayed angry for a few days, then uneasily resumed his relationship with Sharon. She acted the same as always toward him, except a little less willing to drop everything and meet his demands. And she seemed to have more going on, so that she spent less and less time with him.

Darryl decided to cultivate Billy. He hoped to find a way to cut Andrew out with Billy, and ultimately with Sharon. On a Friday evening he called Billy on the phone.

"Hey, short stuff."

"Hi, Darryl-in-a-barrel. What's up?"

"I gotta go down to the beach tomorrow. I thought you might like to go along."

"For how long? I need to be home by seven."

"No problem. We should be back before five."

"Let me ask Mama."

Sharon, when asked, was a little doubtful, but she was going somewhere with Andrew, and had planned to send Billy to Grandma Sadie's house anyway. Maybe something different would be good for both of them. "I guess it's okay, Billy."

"Okay," Billy relayed to Darryl. "What time will you pick me up?"

"Eight o'clock sharp. Be ready."

"What about clothes?"

"Yeah, wear some," replied Darryl with a laugh.

"What *kind*, wise guy?"

"Jeans. Sneakers. Anything. We just gonna ride down there, see a couple guys, maybe mess around a bit, come back. Nothin' special."

"Okay. See ya at eight."

Billy called his grandmother to tell her he wouldn't be coming because he was going to the beach with Darryl. "You be careful," she said.

"Yes'm, I will."

"You be sure and remember to say your prayers tonight."

He wondered why she mentioned that. "I always do, Gramma."

"I know. Good night, Billy."

"G'night."

In the Toyota next morning, Darryl wasted no time. "You, uh, gettin' pretty chummy with this guy Andrew, ain't ya?"

"Yeah. He's okay."

"Okay, huh? What's he about?"

"He's okay, okay? Just a regular guy. I like him."

"How about Sharon, she like him, too?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with his leg?"

it.”

Darryl thought a bit. “He got a job?”

“Yeah. He works at the courthouse.”

“He work for the county?”

“Yeah. The Building Inspector’s office.”

“Makin’ much money?”

“How do I know?”

“You have an idea.”

“So do you. You know more about what a county job pays than I do, probably.”

“Yeah. I prob’ly do. You like this guy, huh?”

“Yeah, I like him. Can we talk about somethin’ else?”

“Like what?”

“Like what we’re gonna do today.”

“Yeah,” said Darryl. “What would you like to do?”

“I don’t know what there is to do. I don’t even know exactly where we’re goin’.”

“The beach. Boardwalk. Rides, games, miniature golf. Sand, seashells, salt water. Except we can’t go in the water except wade a little bit if you want to. No bathin’ suits. Too cold for that anyway. Let’s see—what have I left out?”

“Kites, volleyball, Frisbees, and fishing.”

“Yeah, well, those all take equipment I ain’t got. So, what’s your pleasure?”

“Umm ... boardwalk, I guess. Maybe a game of skee ball.”

“You’re on. Hey. You wanna steer the car?”

“Here? On the highway?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not if I don’t give you a chance to mess up.”

“Well ... okay.” Billy scooted closer to Darryl.

“Here, put your left hand on the wheel, like this ... and your other hand up here, it’s better to use two hands if you’re not used to drivin’. That’s right. Now I’m gonna let go, and you’ll be steerin’ the car. Ready?”

“Uh ... okay.”

Darryl lifted his hands off the wheel. “Don’t over-steer, now. Turn the wheel just enough to correct a drift.” He helped steady the wheel a few times until Billy got the hang of it. “That’s right, that’s good!”

After a few minutes, Billy said, “I think I’ve steered enough.”

“Okay,” said Darryl with a chuckle as he took over the steering wheel. “Was it fun?”

“Yeah, sort of,” said Billy. “It’ll be easier when I’m taller and sittin’ in the driver’s seat.”

“That’s for sure,” replied Darryl. “Betcha can’t wait, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Billy doubtfully. “I can’t wait.”

“Well, when the time comes, I’ll teach you to drive.”

“In this?”

“Or whatever—I’ll have a different car by then. Somethin’ nicer.”

"That's cool," said Billy.

They traveled in silence for a while. Then Billy said, "I'm gonna be an astronaut."

"Yeah, I've heard you say so before," replied Darryl. "You think you can make it?"

"I think so. I'm good at math and science. You have to be good at those."

"Right. You have to be a pilot, too. You gonna be a pilot?"

"Absolutely," said Billy. "I'm gonna try for the Air Force Academy. If I don't get that, I'll at least take Air Force ROTC and enlist after I graduate."

"Got it all figured out already, don't ya?"

"Yeah. Andrew says you gotta do that if you're serious about bein' an astronaut."

"He does, huh? Well, more power to ya. I could never be no astronaut."

"Why not?"

"Not smart enough, for one thing. Too lazy, for another, if you wanna know the truth. I ain't never wanted to work that hard."

"What do you do for a living, Darryl? I never did hear you say."

Darryl smiled thinly. "This 'n' that. Business deals. I look around for opportunities, and when I find one I take advantage of it."

They rode in silence a while. "For example," continued Darryl, "there was this pool hall down on Court Street. I found out that the guy was thinkin' about sellin' it, so I went to this other guy that I know, who was lookin' for a store front, and I told him I thought I could get him a good deal on this pool hall. Anyway, I got these two guys together, they made a deal, and they each forked over some cash. Kinda like a real estate deal, 'cept I ain't licensed."

"You make much money doin' stuff like that?" asked Billy.

"I get by," replied Darryl. "I get by."

"That the kind of thing you're doin' today?"

"Nah, today I'm an errand boy. I'm deliverin' a package."

"You gettin' paid for that?"

"Nope, just doin' a favor for a friend."

"What's in it?"

"I have no idea. An' it don't make no difference. I just hand it over."

"Is it drugs?"

"I hope not. Or if it is, I hope I don't get caught with it on me." Darryl grinned to show he was not serious.

"I hope not, too," said Billy, not smiling.

After delivering the package without incident to the attendant at a parking garage, they headed to the boardwalk. They played three games of skee ball, and Billy won two of them.

"Good eye-hand coordination," said Billy. "Very important for an astronaut."

"Wise guy," said Darryl. "I'll beat your butt next time."

"Yeah, you and whose army?"

Driving back, Darryl remarked, "I got a problem, Billy."

"What's that?"

"This Andrew dude. He's cuttin' me out big time with your mom."

Billy didn't say anything.

"Whatsa matter, I say somethin' wrong?" asked Darryl.

"No."

"I'm askin' for your help."

"What can I do? Cripes, Darryl! Besides, Andrew is my friend!"

"How about me? Ain't I your friend?"

"Sure you're my friend. Would I help him cut you out?"

"I don't know. Would you?"

"This conversation is stupid, Darryl!"

"Hey, don't blow me away, man. I'm desperate."

"I can't help it! Let's change the subject."

Darryl hesitated, then said, "Right." After a few minutes he reached into his jacket, fumbled a minute, and pulled a hand-rolled cigarette and a butane lighter from an inside pocket. He lit the cigarette and put the lighter back in his pocket. He inhaled deeply.

Billy wrinkled his nose. "Is that what I think it is?"

After several seconds, Darryl exhaled. "Finest quality," he said. "You ever smelled pot before?"

"A few times," replied Billy slowly. "Where'd you get it?"

"From some friends of mine." Darryl inhaled another long drag and held it in. "You ever tried it?" he said as he exhaled the acrid smoke.

"No."

"You want to?"

"No."

Darryl exhaled the last of the smoke. "Go ahead," he said, offering the cigarette. "It's great. Sharpens your senses, makes you feel like you're flyin'. You'll be an astronaut without all the years of hard work."

"Are you nuts?"

"No, man, go ahead, give it a try. This is the good stuff."

"Cripes, Darryl, you're crazy. I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend, man. Your best friend."

"You're nothin', Darryl. You're *nothin'* and *nobody*. You're as bad as my father. He smoked pot sometimes, too. No, you're worse than him. At least he never tried to give it to a kid."

"Hey, man. Hey, man. What's the big deal? You don't want it, you don't want it. No big deal. Forget I said anythin'." He dragged on the cigarette again as Billy watched.

"No, *man*," said Billy slowly. "I won't forget it. I don't think my mom will forget it, either."

Darryl snorted smoke. "Hey, Billy, you ain't gonna tell Sharon about this, are ya? Damn, man, don't do that!"

"You gonna stop me, Darryl? You gonna threaten me, maybe?"

"Oh, Christ, Billy, don't tell Sharon." He threw the roach out the window. "Don't do it, man. Please."

"Just shut up, Darryl. Take me home."

“Billy ...”

“Just shut up. You’ve said way too much already.”

They drove in silence until they pulled up in front of the building. Billy opened the door and got out.

“Billy ... don’t ...”

“Good-bye, Darryl.” He shut the door. “Don’t come by, and don’t call. My mother and I aren’t interested in seeing you again.”

“Billy, for Christ’s sake, I’m your friend!”

“I thought so. I was wrong. Good-bye, Darryl.” He turned and walked into the building without looking back.

Darryl sat for several minutes with his head in his hands. “What have I done?” he muttered to himself. “What the *hell* have I done?”

Andrew and Sharon were having coffee at the kitchen table when Billy walked in.

“Hi,” said Andrew.

Billy looked at his mother. “Scratch Darryl,” he said.

Sharon and Andrew were stunned as Billy told them of Darryl’s offering him marijuana.

“You didn’t ...” Sharon began, horrified. She started to take him in her arms.

“Don’t worry, Mama. I’m not that stupid!”

“That sorry sack of ... I’ll make him *eat* his lousy dope!” said Andrew darkly.

“You don’t need to do a thing,” said Billy. “He won’t bother us again. I told him not to show up here and not to call. Let’s just forget him.”

Of course, Darryl had other ideas. Early Sunday evening the doorbell rang, and Billy answered the door. There stood Darryl in his best suit. “What do you want?” said Billy harshly. “I told you not to come here any more.” Sharon came and stood behind Billy.

“I came to say I’m sorry, and to ask you to forgive me,” said Darryl in a subdued voice. “I know I was wrong, I was way outa line. I deserve everything you said, Billy. Sharon, I know you think I’m a scum-bag, and I am. My God, I don’t know what come over me!”

“You’re prob’ly sincere, Darryl,” answered Sharon, “but you’re a little too late. The damage is done, and a few sweet-talkin’ words won’t fix it.”

“But Billy didn’t ...”

“No, he didn’t smoke your dope, no thanks to you. The damage I was referrin’ to was the damage to any relationship we mighta had. That’s over. Billy was right when he said we ain’t interested. He ain’t, and I ain’t. Good-bye.”

Andrew, arriving, walked up behind Darryl. Seeing who it was, Andrew growled, “You! You no good, pot-smoking creep! Get lost before I lose my temper!” His clenched fists showed he was close to it already.

“I come to apologize.”

“It’s not accepted. Now get lost, and stay lost!”

Darryl started to speak again, then shut his mouth. His shoulders sagged. He turned and walked slowly toward the stairs, and descended from view.

“The nerve of that guy!” said Andrew. “What an absolute ... *jerk!*”

"He's probably feelin' pretty bad about all this," said Sharon thoughtfully.

"Well, he ought to! Don't give him the time of day. If he shows up again when I'm not here, you let me know, and I'll make sure he gets the message!"

Billy said thoughtfully, "I think he got it. I doubt if he'll come back again."

#

Monday afternoon at Grandma's Billy was much quieter than usual. He didn't even want any cookies. "Is something bothering you, or should I get out the thermometer and take your temperature?" asked Grandma.

Billy smiled weakly, but didn't say anything.

"You want to read? Your choice."

He shook his head.

"Don't want to talk, don't want any cookies, don't want to read. I think I will get the thermometer."

Billy sighed. "I'm just kind of ... sad today, I guess."

"How come?"

"On account of Darryl. He tried to get me to smoke pot Saturday."

"He *what*?"

"He was smokin' a joint, and he kept tryin' to get me to try it."

"Well, I never! I thought he was your friend!"

"Yeah. So did I. Gramma?"

"What, Billy?"

"Is marijuana really all that bad? I mean, I know you've told me it is, and so has Mama, but Darryl doesn't seem to think so. I don't think he knew what a bad thing he was doin' until I told him."

"Billy, listen to me very carefully now. Are you listening?"

"Yes'm."

"The devil is a liar. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Probably his biggest lie of all is the one he was telling Darryl. He says, 'This little sin isn't really so bad. Lots of people do it. There's really nothing wrong with it. It's okay.' Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I ... think so."

"You remember what dope does to your brain, don't you?"

"Yes. It destroys brain cells."

"That's right. You want to be an astronaut. Do you think you have any extra brain cells that you won't ever need? Can you afford to just waste some on a cheap thrill like marijuana?"

"No. That's what I was thinkin' when I said 'No' to Darryl."

"That's good. So, now, answer your own question. 'Is marijuana really all that bad?'"

"Yes. It's bad."

"Even if lots of people smoke it?"

"Yes."

"Even if Darryl and his friends all tell you it's okay?"

"It's still bad."

“What if the government makes it legal? Does that change things?”

“Well ... I don’t think so, but ...”

“But what?”

“If it’s bad—I mean *since* it’s bad—why would they make it legal?”

“Because sometimes people aren’t as wise as they ought to be. Even senators and congressmen make mistakes. And presidents, and Supreme Court justices. Don’t forget that, either. Did you say your prayers Friday night?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, you need to say them again tonight, and thank God for keeping you safe from that temptation.”

“I wasn’t really tempted. I didn’t want to smoke that pot. I’m not that dumb.”

“That’s exactly why you should be thankful. When we’re smart enough to do the right thing, where do you think that wisdom comes from? It comes from above, and it comes in answer to prayer. Don’t ever think you can do the right thing without God’s help. You can’t, and I can’t. Nobody can.”

Billy sat and thought for several seconds. Then he lifted his face and smiled. “I feel better, Gramma. I could prob’ly stand a couple of cookies.”

#

Two weeks passed. Surprisingly, Darryl’s name hardly came up at all, but somehow the air still seemed tainted with the residue of what he had done, like the smell of a dead rat that has seeped into the walls of a building and occasionally disturbs the nostrils with a reminder of how foul it was.

On Thursday night, Sharon and Andrew came to Grandma’s for supper, and to celebrate Billy’s twelfth birthday. Billy opened his presents before supper: a book of “Best-Loved Poems” from Grandma, a belt and a wallet from Sharon, and—best of all—a real Swiss Army knife from Andrew.

“He’s too young for a knife like that,” said Sharon.

“No, he’s not,” replied Andrew. I got my first pocketknife at twelve, and he’s a lot more responsible than I was.”

“I’ll be careful with it, Mama,” promised Billy, putting it carefully into the pocket of his jeans.

“You don’t take it to school, ever!” said Sharon.

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t have it long if I did!”

“You don’t ever ‘accidentally’ forget you have it in your pocket or your backpack, either. Nothin’ like that. If they don’t take it away from you, I will. You hear me?”

“Okay. I read you loud and clear.”

“You better!”

Supper was fried chicken and green beans, mashed potatoes and cornbread. “I may just arrange my schedule so I can eat here more often,” said Andrew.

“You’ll look like Dennis pretty soon, too,” said Billy. Andrew laughed.

“Who’s Dennis?” asked Sharon, looking from one to the other?

“Friend of Andrew’s,” said Billy with a wink.

They sat at the table with dessert and coffee (milk, for Billy), not wanting the evening to end.

"It's a shame about Darryl," said Sharon.

"That bum. Why do you want to bring him up? Forget him."

"Easier said than done," said Grandma. "Especially when the situation hasn't been resolved."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Andrew. "He's gone for good. He'd better be."

"He's not gone, Andrew. As long as there's bitterness in your heart toward him, he'll never be gone."

"I have a right to be bitter. The guy's a creep. What he did to Billy, or tried to do, just proved it."

"You have a right to beat your head against a brick wall, if you want to. It's probably not the best idea, though."

"What does that mean?"

"You think you're somehow punishing Darryl for his sins by staying bitter toward him. Well, maybe you are and maybe you aren't. It depends on whether he cares what you think. But you're doing more harm to yourself than you are to him."

Nobody said anything for several seconds, then Grandma continued. "Anger, unresolved anger, is one of the most potent poisons there is. It can eat at you and make you unfit to live with, and it can even make you physically sick. Did you know that?"

"If you say so," replied Andrew reluctantly.

"You don't have to take my word for it. It's a well documented, scientific fact."

"Okay. So what should I do? Find Darryl and beat the daylights out of him?"

"No. You should go, all of you, and find Darryl and forgive him."

"Forgive him! No way! Not in a million years!"

Sharon started to speak, but Grandma stopped her with an upraised hand. "Why can't he be forgiven, Andrew?"

"Because of what he tried to do. It was monstrous!"

"I agree. It was monstrous. Billy is my grandson, whom I love very dearly. Do you think I don't appreciate the evil of Darryl's actions?"

"Then how can you suggest that we forgive him?"

"Have you ever done anything wrong, Andrew?"

"Not that wrong!"

"Wrong is wrong, but let that pass, for now. Think of the worst, meanest, most evil and hurtful and selfish thing you ever did. Don't tell us what it was, just think about it."

"Well ... umm ... okay."

"Are you sorry you did that thing?"

"Yes, I am."

"Did it hurt anybody?"

"Yes."

"Do you want that person to forgive you?"

"I would, if he was still alive."

"Okay, now pay attention. If that person forgave you, would it make your sin, whatever it was, less hurtful or evil?"

"No, I guess not."

"That's right. You did it, and nothing can go back and undo it. So why would you want to be forgiven?"

"I ... I don't really know. I would just feel better about myself if ... if I knew that person wasn't still down on me."

"You're getting close. Forgiveness heals. What does it heal?"

"Your feelings. Your mental image of yourself, your self-image."

"No, that's getting rid of a symptom. The thing that is healed is the *relationship*."

"I don't have a relationship with Darryl. I don't want one."

"You may not want one, but you have one. You've created one for yourself. You've set yourself up as his judge, jury, and executioner, from now on. That's a heavy burden, not even God wants it, but you've taken it upon yourself and you're stuck with it. Until you decide to lay it down."

Andrew was silenced. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Miss Sadie," said Sharon tentatively?

"What is it, dear?"

"That's kinda what I've been doin' with James, ain't it? Stayin' angry, stayin' bitter over what he done. Wishin' he was still here so I could say all the mean things I've been thinkin' all this time. Wishin' I could pick up a baseball bat and get rid of all my hurts and frustrations by takin' 'em out of his hide."

"Yes, Sharon, that's the burden you've been carrying."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't want to hear it, any more than I wanted to hear you bad-mouth James. You just weren't ready yet."

"I'm ready now, I think. I can't hurt James no more. I guess it's time I stopped lettin' him hurt me so much."

"Miss Sadie ..." Andrew began.

"Yes, dear?"

"What you say is right. At least I can't come up with any argument. I know it's right. But ... how? I can't do it. When I think of Darryl and his dope, my skin crawls. How can I forgive him? I can't do it!"

"You don't have to use your own supply of forgiveness, Andrew. God has already forgiven Darryl. All you have to do is appropriate some of God's forgiveness. It's easier than it sounds. It's just a matter of doing it."

"I ... okay. If you say so. I don't understand half of what you've said, but okay."

"That's good. I'll bet you're already beginning to feel some relief from that burden, aren't you?"

"You know, I think maybe I am!"

"Sharon, what about you? Can you forgive Darryl, too?"

"Oh, yeah, I took that step before I got to James. I'm ready."

"Billy?"

"I don't know. Forgiving means not holding it against him, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that's what it means."

"Well, if I'm ever around Darryl again, I'll always remember what he did. I'll always think of him like that, urging me to smoke that weed."

"No, you won't, Billy. You won't hang on to that."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll replace that memory with a better one. Oh, you'll still remember what he did, but when you think of him in the future, you'll think of his smile when he realizes he's forgiven. You'll think of better things than his sin against you."

"Miss Sadie?"

"What, Sharon?"

"Billy's right, though, in one way. We can't go back to the way we were before with Darryl. We don't even want to."

"That's true. Your old relationship with him is dead, for each of you. In fact, it was replaced by that punishment relationship that I mentioned. Now you'll have a different relationship. It may be just that there's peace between you, and you never see each other again. That's okay. Or it might be something else, a new kind of friendship based on a better understanding of each other than you had before. But you're right, it will be different."

"So be it," exclaimed Andrew. He stood up with a wince. "I'm going to find Darryl. If I'm going to do this forgiveness thing, I might as well get it done."

"Let's all of us go," said Sharon. We ought to do it up right."

"Yeah," said Billy. "You, too, Grandma."

"Me? Do you want me to come along?"

"Sure. You forgive him, too, don't ya?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I do. Anyway, I'd really like to see all this forgiveness happening."

They took the bus, and had to walk two blocks to get to Darryl's apartment building. "Are you sure this is it?" asked Andrew. The place was hardly better than a tenement. It was difficult to picture the beautifully dressed Darryl living in such a place.

"It looks better on the inside," replied Sharon. They went in. Darryl's apartment was on the ground floor, in the back. They knocked on the door.

"He said he would be here, didn't he?" asked Billy. Sharon had called before they left Grandma's.

They heard a chain rattling and a dead bolt being unlocked, then the door opened. Darryl was a little startled to see the four of them standing there. Sharon had said they were coming, but not how many. "Uh, come in, I ... I guess."

They went inside and stood in the living room. It was a fairly large room, decently decorated with comfortable furniture. Sharon spoke.

"Last time you were at our place, you asked us something. You asked us to forgive you. Well, you got it. We all forgive you."

Darryl gaped like a fish trying to breathe thin air. "You do? I ... I ... don't know what to say. I didn't expect you to"

"To forgive you?" said Andrew.

"I didn't think you'd be able to."

"It wasn't easy. In fact, I was dead set against it. But we had to do it."

"But ... why?"

“So we—and you—can get on with our lives, without the bitterness and bad feeling hanging over us forever. I didn’t realize what a burden it was until I found out how to put it down. Thanks to Miss Sadie.”

Darryl turned and walked around the living room, shaking his head. “This is too much!” he exclaimed. “Too much!”

“What do you mean?” asked Grandma?

“I mean too much is changin’ too fast. Do you know what I did last week?”

“No,” said Sharon.

“I quit the dope business. I was never in it, really, just did some deliveries for some people, and sold a little pot to my friends now and then. It kept me solvent. Y’all sit down.” As they sat, he said, “You want some coffee or somethin’?”

“No,” said Sharon. “Tell us what else you did.”

“I got a job. I mean a real job. I went to this realtor I know, I’ve dealt with him a few times in the past, and he’s on the up and up, you know? I said, ‘I want to become a real estate agent.’ He said, ‘It’s hard work and it don’t pay much for a long time, there’s a lot to learn, you may not make it.’ I said, ‘I’ll make it.’ I will, too. Unless I figure out I want to do somethin’ else.”

“That’s great!” said Sharon.

“I done a few other things, too. I wrote you a letter,” he said, looking at Andrew. “I ain’t mailed it yet, but I was goin’ to. I might as well just hand it to you.” He picked up a sealed, stamped envelope from a desk and gave it to Andrew. “Go ahead, read it.”

Andrew tore open the envelope and extracted a single sheet of paper. He read it silently, then handed it to Sharon. She looked it over, then read it aloud.

“Dear Andrew. Whatever you think of me, it ain’t bad enough. I’m sorry for what I almost done to Billy, and I’m sorrier for the sorry life I have lived so far. About all I got to be glad about is that Sharon has got you, a decent guy, and didn’t have to wind up stuck with a loser like me. I got no right to ask anything from you, but I hope you will be good to her and Billy. I wish I was like you, maybe I’d of been decent enough to be where you are. Please don’t hate me forever. Good luck to all of you. Darryl.” Sharon got out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

“Praise the Lord,” said Grandma quietly.

“That’s the other thing I done,” said Darryl. I got down on my knees night before last and I prayed to God that he’d forgive me, and that he’d help all of y’all to forgive me, too. He’s done answered my prayer, too! Ain’t that somethin’?”

“Praise the Lord!” said Grandma again emphatically. “Thank you, Jesus!”

“An’ I took five ounces of crack cocaine and flushed it down the commode!”

They were all stunned. “You *what?*” said Andrew incredulously.

“I flushed five ounces of crack down the commode.”

“Five ounces—that’s worth a bundle on the street!”

“Not no more, it ain’t. It’s gone!”

“But—was it yours?”

“Mine? Heck, no. I told you, I just deliver some of it here and there. Used to. Not no more.”

“But someone will want that crack. They’ll come looking for it.”

“I thought about that. But then I thought about those kids that would be usin’ it, and I thought about Billy, and, hey—I just put it where it belonged.”

“You’re crazy, man. They’ll take it out of your hide.”

“They’ll be ticked for awhile, but they’ll get over it.”

During the pause that followed Darryl’s announcement, the door opened and two men walked into the room with automatic pistols leveled. One of the men calmly engaged the dead bolt and the chain, then stepped to the side so that he could keep everyone in view. The other, a well-dressed, portly, balding man in his fifties with a heavy scowl on his face, stood facing the crowd. “Get up, all of you. Move over by the door.” The man’s voice was smooth and cultured, incongruous with the gun in his hand. They all moved to comply with his order. “Not you, Darryl.”

He walked over to Darryl and held out his hand. “Where’s my stuff, Darryl? I want it now.”

“I ... uh ... flushed it, Terry.”

“You what? Did I hear you right? You flushed it?”

“Yeah.”

“Down the toilet?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? Never mind, don’t tell me why.”

“Because of the kids.”

“I said, don’t tell me why.” He suddenly lashed out with the pistol and slammed it into the side of Darryl’s head. “You two-bit errand boy,” he said as Darryl crumpled to the floor, “you pitiful little creep, you had the nerve to flush five ounces of my stuff—*my stuff*—down the *toilet!*” The culture was gone from Terry’s voice.

Darryl moaned. Terry kicked him, hard, in the side. He looked around. “You,” he said, indicating Andrew, “is it true, what he said? He flushed my crack down the toilet?”

“That’s what he just told us,” replied Andrew.

Terry walked slowly around the room. He looked at several items—a magazine, an ash tray, a glass vase with some tired flowers. He picked up the vase and threw it against the wall, where it shattered noisily. “Damn it!” he shouted. He went and stood over Darryl, who was moaning and beginning to try to sit up. “What I gotta do now, you stupid little puke, is figure out whether I can ever get my money back out of your crummy, worthless hide!”

Andrew managed to catch Sharon’s eye. He glanced sideways several times at an umbrella stand beside her. There were three umbrellas in it. She guessed his intent, and shook her head minutely. She wasn’t feeling heroic. He mouthed the words, “They will kill us, too.” She hesitated, then nodded.

Terry reached down with his left hand and grasped the front of Darryl’s shirt. Fabric ripped as he pulled Darryl to his feet and shoved him into a chair. He slapped Darryl’s face. “Mickey. Get me a glass of water.”

The second thug walked slowly into the kitchen, meanwhile keeping a wary eye on the group near the door. He picked up a glass from the counter, flipped on the faucet, and filled the glass, all without taking his attention from them for more than a split second. He re-entered the living room and handed the glass to Terry, who dashed the water into Darryl’s face. Darryl gasped, opened his eyes, and shook his head.

“Okay, crumb.” Terry threw the glass into the kitchen, where it smashed against the sink cabinet. “Convince me that I shouldn’t waste you right now and be done with it.”

“What ... what do you mean?” stammered Darryl. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek.

“Fifty gees, that’s what I mean. That’s what you flushed down the toilet. That’s what you owe me tonight. Tomorrow it’ll be more.”

“Young man, may I say something?” It was Grandma.

Terry looked at her sideways, then turned toward her. “You have something to contribute?”

“I think so.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Sarah Jackson. Most folks call me ‘Miss Sadie’.”

“What do you have to do with this bum?” He wagged his head toward Darryl.

“He’s just a friend. A foolish friend, who is becoming wiser.”

“He wasn’t wise to flush my dope down the toilet.”

“Be that as it may, I have a suggestion to make.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“As it stands now, you’re out fifty thousand dollars, is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, suppose you kill Darryl. Then you’ll have to kill all four of us ...”

Sharon gasped.

“... because we’ll be witnesses. Right?”

“Keep talking.”

“Then you’ll have the problem of getting rid of five bodies—or at least making sure that there’s no evidence to connect you to the crime. By the way, your fingerprints are on fragments of glass that are scattered all over this apartment.”

“So?”

“And even if you do that successfully, you’ll still be out the fifty thousand dollars.”

“Yeah.” Terry rubbed his chin. “That’s right. So I might as well just turn around and walk away, is that what you’re saying?”

“Exactly. I’m glad you see the logic of it.”

“The logic stinks.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it fails to take into account one very important thing. My reputation.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if I let this slime ball get away with it, I’ll be a target for a hundred two-bit hotshots who think they can rip me off, too. Besides, I’ll be a laughing stock in front of my peers. No,” he turned back and grabbed Darryl by the shirt front and hauled him to his feet again, “I’m afraid I really have no choice.” He put his face inches from Darryl’s. “What’s it gonna be, creep? You got fifty for me tonight?”

“I can get it,” croaked Darryl.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow it will be fifty-five.”

“Okay.”

“Where is it?”

“Bank account.”

“You got a passbook?”

“No. I do it by mail.”

“A deposit slip showing a balance? A bank statement? *Something?*”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“I’ll get it.”

“I said, where?”

“In the desk.”

“Mickey. Check the desk.”

“Cover for me,” said Mickey.

“Yeah.” Terry stepped back and raised his gun.

Mickey opened the desk drawers. From the second drawer on the right he took a handgun. “Nice try,” he said.

“No. It’s there. I promise.”

“Mickey?”

Mickey pocketed the gun and stepped back to his guard post. “It’s clean.”

“Get it,” said Terry.

Darryl walked unsteadily to the desk. He opened the middle drawer, then appeared to steady himself. Suddenly, with a mighty heave, he ripped the drawer from the desk and threw it at Mickey.

If either gun had been aimed at him when he did it, Darryl would have been dead. As it was, both shots went harmlessly into the wall. Meanwhile, Andrew launched himself at Terry, and Sharon swept an umbrella out of the umbrella stand, grabbed it by the tip end, and with a swing worthy of a golf pro, decked Mickey with a shot right between the eyes.

Andrew and Terry grappled on the floor. Terry still held onto his gun, and Andrew was trying desperately to get it away from him. They rolled over, and Andrew cried out as their combined weight fell on his bad hip.

Billy and Grandma, both momentarily frozen, roused and sought weapons. Billy grabbed the whole umbrella stand and lifted it in his arms. Terry, the stronger of the two men, twisted the gun out of Andrew’s grasp and brought it between them. It went off just as the umbrella stand crashed down on Terry’s head and shattered into a hundred pieces.

There was a pregnant pause of a few seconds, and then Andrew groaned. Sharon gasped, “Andrew! Oh, my God!” She knelt beside him and rolled him off the inert form of Terry. As he lay on his back, they could see a spreading stain on the front of his shirt.

Grandma picked up the phone and dialed 911. “There’s been a shooting,” she reported quickly. “We need an ambulance immediately. Also some policemen—we have a couple of men to turn over to them.” She gave the address and her name, and said, “Hurry!”

Hanging up, she said, “Billy, get some towels. Hurry! Darryl, find something to tie these men up.” They ran to do her bidding, while she went and unbolted the door.

Grandma knelt beside Andrew and checked his pulse. It was weak and irregular. She prayed fervently but silently, Lord, preserve his life. Put your hand on him, Lord. Keep him alive until the paramedics get here.

Billy came with towels, and they packed some of them inside his shirt to try to stop the bleeding. Andrew groaned and tried to talk. "Sharon!" he whispered.

"I'm right here, Andrew. I'm right here." Tears were streaming down her face.

"Sharon," he whispered again. "We would have been ... good ... together ... the three of us"

"Don't talk, just rest. I'm here."

Andrew moved his eyes. "Darryl? Is he ... okay?"

Darryl, finished with tying Terry's hands behind him, bent over Andrew. "I'm okay, Andrew. Not a scratch. Thanks to you."

Andrew sighed, "Good." He coughed weakly. "Take care ..."

"Don't die, Andrew. I'm the one who should die. I did this to you."

"No ... it's No. Don't think that. You're not ..."

He coughed again. "You're not ... responsible ... for all the evil ... in the world." He rested for several seconds. "You do ... something ... for me."

"Just name it."

"Take care of ... Billy ... Sharon ... Sadie ..."

Andrew closed his eyes. He was struggling to breathe as the blood filled his lungs. Sharon wailed, "Isn't there something we can *do*? Oh, my God!"

"Pray," said Grandma. "Pray hard."

The police arrived, and said the ambulance was on the way. Andrew died about five minutes before it arrived.

#

"Gramma?"

"Yes, Billy?"

"Why did Andrew have to die?"

"I don't know."

"Oh. I thought you would."

Grandma sighed. "Some questions are so big that we can never know their answers, Billy. Most of the 'why' questions are. Some things, only God knows."

"Did God make him die?"

"Everybody dies, Billy. Most die sooner than we wish they would."

"Did you answer my question?"

"I think so. Shall I try again?"

"Please."

"Everybody dies. That means that each person's death is part of God's plan for that person's life. Death is not some strange thing that's never supposed to happen. It's built in to the way things are. So, yes, in a sense, God made Andrew die. Now, if you're asking whether God intended for those drug dealers to be there and do the things they did, then no, that's not what God wanted. But he let it happen, because he created us with free will. We can even sell drugs and kill people if we want to. And he used that event, I truly believe, to bring about Andrew's death at

precisely the right time. For Andrew. Maybe we don't like it. Maybe it wasn't the best time for us. But it was God's time."

Billy sat and thought for a long minute. Finally he sighed. "You know, Mama is back seein' Darryl again."

"I know."

"You think that's okay?"

"It's okay with me. Is it okay with you?"

"I guess. You were right, you know."

"About what?"

"About me rememberin' what Darryl did. I hardly ever think of it any more."

"Good."

"You know what, Grandma?"

"What, Billy?"

"Lots of people make mistakes."

"Yes, they do."

"They can still be good people."

"Yes, they can."

"Was my daddy a good man?"

"One of the best."

"You know what? When I get to be an astronaut, and I'm up there in space, havin' adventures an' all, you know what else I'll be doin'?"

"No."

"I'll be thinkin' of Daddy, and Andrew, and Mama, and ol' Darryl, and you. I'll be thankin' God for all of you, every chance I get."

Grandma took Billy in her arms and hugged him for a long time.