

Prologue

The day the letter came from the Hardin County Historical Society, I opened it with excitement, even though I knew more or less what it would say.

They asked me if I'd be willing to travel two-thousand-five-hundred miles from my home in the San Francisco Bay Area to participate in the rededication of the Philips Medical Park, a place with which I had had a strong connection as a child, producing many memories—some fond, some ugly, some of which might even be characterized as bizarre.

In certain ways, I dreaded the return—as though there were unfinished business there—business I didn't want to face. In the end, though, there was an attraction, some inexplicable force, which left no doubt in my mind but that I would leave my law practice for the few days I thought I could spare and return to this scene from my childhood.

Sometimes you have to go back to where you've been, I told myself, to see where you are headed.

When I drove into town from the south through Mount Victory on that blustery Friday morning in March, I passed the front porch of one of my old girlfriend's houses, which brought back twangs of puppy love. As I drove further into town I found my taste buds longing for a stop at the Tasty Freeze, where I planned to have one of Lloyd Bloom's extra thick peanut butter milk shakes. But it was no longer there. It had turned into a Convenient Mart. So I headed straight for the park. The town, a farming community in Northern Ohio was small and I found myself there in no time.

As I looked out over Philips Park, the cold gray morning was just giving way to an afternoon of bright sunshine. It was that time in March when winter was just about to retreat in favor of the rich, balmy days of spring. As the snow melted, it had apportioned itself into little rock hard islands, which I knew would soon vanish as a warming trend had been predicted on the news. When I was a kid, the snow would have been speckled with the black soot of coal dust, but now it was as pure as, well . . . the driven snow.

I parked my car in an alleyway between Main and Detroit Streets and peered over the jagged edge of the granite shale fence. Memories danced in my head like the flurry of fireflies on a hot, humid summer evening, although it was still much too early for them.

I wondered how many of my old friends, classmates and other acquaintances would be at the ceremony on Sunday afternoon, when my wife was to join me with our children. I was especially interested in seeing the smiles, quizzical looks and telltale smirks of those who, along with me, had witnessed the events which made the park famous, as though it had an agenda of its own, independent of human influence.

Sadly I knew at least one of my very best friends wouldn't be there, because he'd recently been killed in a car crash. His sports car had veered out of control on the old River Road, when he was home visiting his mother. There was conjecture that it might have been suicide, since he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and had declined treatment—opting instead for the shorter quality-of-life route. But I, for one, refused to believe that. He was too full of life and reveled in it too much for me to accept the notion he had willingly given up even a small piece of it, albeit near the end of the road.

Why they had asked me to come early and be their guest of honor was anybody's guess, but I thought I probably knew the answer to that as clearly as I knew what was in that letter before I had opened it. With the death of my dear friend, I was probably the only person alive, who could faithfully recount all of the facts and circumstances which had combined to make the park a legend.

Part I

The Carefree Days of Youth

Chapter One

When I was a kid in Indiana in the 1950's, I remember feeling my mother's fingertips on my scalp, as she washed my hair. When she kneaded it, it felt good. But when she scratched with her fingernails, it smarted.

"Timmy, this water is just brown with dirt! It's pure mud! It's a wonder it doesn't stop up the drain," she said in a critical tone, as though I had gotten my hair dirty just to make more work for her.

I couldn't see the water, because I was bent over the sink with my head down and my eyelids securely shut. As nearly as I can recall, I was only four or five years old.

Then after she agitated my hair for a while, she reached for a glass and filled it with cold water. I hated that part, because I knew what was coming. The beginning had been warm, almost pleasant, even though she wasn't careful to keep the soap out of my eyes. When I would complain about them stinging she'd say, "Quit your bellyaching."

“Quit your bellyaching” was a refrain I would hear from my mother’s lips over and over through the course of my growing up years, even though an actual bellyache was something I seldom had.

She poured that glass of cold water on my head, refilled it and poured another. “Stop! That feels awful,” I said.

“Quit your bellyaching,” she replied.

It was while she was pouring the cold water, while I couldn’t look at her, that she reminded me of my family history. It wasn’t the part of the family history where we’d looked at picture albums and talked about the fun we’d had at a picnic, but the part of the history that we never discussed with anyone outside our family circle. It was filled with lunacy and embarrassment.

She reminded me that my dad had mental problems, as did any number of “my relations,” as she called them. Even though she told me about *his* madness, which showed itself only on isolated occasions, I was savvy enough, even at that age to realize that she had peculiarities of her own. These were not peccadilloes, but deeply imbedded tracks in her thinking process, tracks I had come to abhor.

The only person in our household who was more afraid of everyday threats to ones existence--of heights, of bodies of water, whether flowing or stationery, of snow on the roadways, of lightning or thunder, unexpected quirks, fates and fickle of nature, than me, was my mother. And I was the kid. I was the one who was supposed to be afraid. If it weren’t for her insistence and repeated pronouncement of these fears, I might well have gotten over them at a much younger age. She never did.

Then, after reminding me of the bizarre manifestations of mental instability in my dad's family, she went on to describe their gloomy and morbid consequences, which often included outcomes, such as institutionalization or suicide. She poured another glass of ice cold water to seal my fate. She told me I was very likely, virtually certain in fact, to one day have to endure one or more of these experiences myself. She couldn't say which one or when, but assured me it would happen, sometime when I least expected it.

"It could be tomorrow," she warned. "It could be next week or in ten years. You never know. Your dad's illness came on later in life," she said. "In his case, he had gotten to where he was convinced the scourge had missed him. Then a few weeks before his fortieth birthday, it came crashing down on him for the first time."

I wasn't sure how a mental illness could crash, but that's the image I developed, like a picture on a wall or a pitcher on a shelf, falling and crashing against the floor.

"So don't think you'll never get it," she went on. "You always have to be ready. Look at what it did to your dad. And, of course, you know about Aunt Mary."

I didn't know about Aunt Mary, but tried my best to give the impression that I did. My future seemed bleak enough without being reminded of whatever had happened to Aunt Mary.

Most of the time, except when my mother was helping to create self-doubt, I felt perfectly sane. But how could I be sure I would stay that way? At night, as I stared at the pictures on my wallpaper, I sometimes thought they had come to life. As I looked up at the ceiling, it seemed to spawn cobwebs that would descend upon me, laden with thousands of poisonous spiders. I woke up in a cold sweat.

How would I know if I were “sick,” as my mother used that word to describe my father’s condition? He seldom realized he was sick when he was having one of his spells. Beforehand and afterwards, he could look at the stupid and silly things he did, like call the president to offer him advice, and then he would acknowledge his illness. But he never did when it was in full bloom. It was then that his lunacy and madness merged into one. Would this ever happen to me?

Years later, I realized that J. Edgar Hoover must have had a file on him.

My mother’s counsel in these matters was as cold as the tap water she used to pour on my head and as abrasive as her nails.

Her voice was methodical and businesslike, cool and sharp. It never cracked or wavered. And she never touched me, except then, when she was kneading or scratching my scalp. My older brother said that if he hadn’t touched me as a child, I would never have been touched.

“Got to get the mud out! Got to get that sand and dirt out of your hair!” She was obsessed. My scalp practically bled. But the more biting scar of my youth came from the lash of her tongue and not her fingers. “Timmy, one day, you’ll be a lunatic, just like your father.”

* * *

When we moved to Ohio in 1960, there was a park in the center of town, where no one ever played. It wasn’t that it didn’t appeal to us. Quite the contrary. It was full of huge, shady maples, a few tall, skinny elms, perfectly-edged-prickly barberry bushes and a pageant of flowers. There were hundreds of daffodils and violets in spring. Then pansies and fragrant pink peonies bloomed during the summer, followed by a parade of

bright yellow and rust colored chrysanthemums in the fall. Tall green pine trees swayed in the breeze along the park's perimeter and lazily stood guard over all this beauty.

Within the granite shale fence, which enclosed the park there was a pond surrounded by grassy open space, where we could have played football or batted a ball, or flew our model planes.

But, we were afraid to go there. There was something unsettling about the place, as though it were inhabited by angry spirits who teased us with the park's beauty, yet punished us if we got too close.

We rode our bikes only up to the edge, taking sidewalks or alleyways that ran between Main and Detroit streets in Little Chicago, the town where I grew up. There were gates on either end. By then, we were forbidden to enter for it had long since been relieved of its duties as a park.

Some years before it had been converted into a medical facility by a group consisting of the three most prominent doctors in our community. But, for some reason the medical center, while it had had a brief heyday, never turned into the bastion of modern medical marvels everyone expected of it the day our mayor cut the bright, yellow ribbons for its grand opening.

Instead, it closed abruptly and without fanfare, after only a few years. One of the doctors, Herman Schultz, left town. It was rumored he had run off with a woman who was reputed to be his mistress. She also happened to be my piano teacher. But, oddly enough, while it was later established that she was not with him in his new home in Memphis, Miss Jackson had disappeared from Little Chicago forever. There were rumors that Doctor Schultz had done her in, or at least bought her a one way ticket to

Tahiti. But he denied both allegations and the police eventually marked the case closed. The disappearance of my piano teacher remained a mystery.

Of the two additional physicians, one retired early and the other, Randolph White, ended up practicing medicine again, but only briefly. He was still young in years when he was committed to the county mental health facility shortly after the park closed. The nature of his illness was not disclosed. Some said he had a nervous breakdown. Others said he had gone mad. The townspeople never really knew for sure.

Soon after that, the park became idle, overrun with weeds and tall grass. This all took place over the course of only a few short years. The structure that had once stood proudly as a beacon of hope to the afflicted was now vacant and boarded up. We wondered why no one came along and rented it for another purpose.

The building may have been boarded up, but the windows were still intact. One could see the reflection of sunlight in the glass peeking between the slats, tempting us to hurl the first stone. If we ever got started we knew that every window would get smashed. We had proven that just a few weeks earlier at an old toy factory that had closed down on the south end of town. From the clank of the first rock to the clink of the last piece of glass to fall, it had been a colossal orgy of destruction.

We felt that way in spite of the punishments dished out by our parents that evening, as word of what happened passed from one household to another, first by party-line and then from our friendly, but nosey operators to the entire community. For weeks the operators rebuked our behavior by lecturing us every time any of us picked up the phone to place a call. If I met one of them on the street today, I wouldn't be surprised if I got another lecture on the subject.

A part of each of us, let's call it the short-on-judgment-curious part, wanted to climb over the fence and explore. But another part—let's call that our good-common-sense part--warned us to stay out. The old Philips Medical Park building seemed to age before its time, like that rare disease where a nine or ten year old can have a beard and see it turn gray before his eleventh birthday. That's how old we were at the time—just about to turn eleven, right at the beginning of fifth grade.

Kenny McNealy was the star athlete in our town, but, God, was he ever mean. He bullied not only the smaller children, but many his own size, and a few even bigger than himself. We called him—not to his face, of course--Kenny McNasty. We all had nicknames.

There was Epar (pronounced Ē'-par), which is “rape” spelled backwards for reasons I never knew. I mean what could an eleven-year-old kid have to do with rape? Many of the names had already stuck before I had moved to town and, consequently, I generally knew the origin only of those that had been explained to me.

Atlas was self-explanatory, because he had only one testicle, or so it was rumored, as did the Atlas of mythological fame. Lots of guys claimed to have verified this freak of nature in the locker room, but I was too timid to look.

Beetle Bailey was one of the most animated people I ever met and a cartoon character in his own right, even if his last name had not been Bailey. If that hadn't been his nickname, he would have been called Moon Mullins or Daffy Duck. There were more of us boys and even one girl, Mudge, who hung out together, but I'll get to the rest of the gang later.

Kenny didn't hang out with us, at least not most of the time. But he did on this particular day, when we were out of school celebrating Jacob Parrott's birthday, a local Civil War hero, who was the first U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor winner. Beetle Bailey, McNasty's more usual playmate, and like him, a member of the South End Gang, had gone on a trip to Coshocton to bury one of his cousins, who had been hit by a car while riding his bike. This was the first experience with a kid's death any of us had ever had. We tried not to mention it, but we knew it was on each other's minds for days, if not weeks afterwards.

So, there we were—me, Epar, Atlas, Booger (no explanation required on that one), Marsh Rat, Farley, RW (for Robert Wilhelm) and Mudge, whom we all knew would have been called "Smudge" if her little sister had gotten her phonetics right after Rebecca Carpenter took her mother's lipstick and smeared it all over her face and the living room wall. I thought she was cute, even then, with her long strawberry blonde braids and freckles, although she prided herself on being a tomboy and could win most fights, should anyone be stupid enough to challenge her right to hang out with us guys.

It was fall, I remember, because it was one of those crisp, clear Ohio days when you could smell the sharp, ashen scent of leaves burning in the gutters wherever you went. Most of the leaves were still on trees and formed a colorful canopy from orange and yellow to deep purple. The fallen ones crinkled and snapped under our feet. The sun shone brilliantly and the wind provided a cool, invigorating breeze. It felt exhilarating just to be alive, especially after what had happened to Beetle's cousin.

Usually we didn't get too close to the park, or even the fence which surrounded it. Sometimes we would go two or three streets over and ride up Wayne or Cherry Street,

when we were going north or south to avoid passing near it. If any of us did stop, we would creep up to the fence and sneak a peek over its jagged edge. We had never been brave enough to go barreling up to it on our Schwinns the way we did that day. But we had been goaded on by McNasty and our manhood—or tomboy-hood in the case of Mudge--had been called into question. I can still hear the sound of his voice. “If you guys don’t ride over to the park with me, you’re a bunch of pussies, just like everyone’s been saying!”

Our virility at issue, we accepted the challenge and zoomed off like Kamikaze pilots towards the fence. First, RW, who had the only English bike in the bunch, went sliding on the loose gravel down the alleyway on the north side, just off Main Street and hit his brakes. We each followed by doing the same thing in rapid succession. Our bikes skidded into place one by one to form a row.

The wind was blowing from the northwest that day, which I remember well, because McNasty queued us up with a fart, which immediately drifted downwind and stunk like holy-be-geezus, even outdoors on a breezy day like this.

Booger chided, “Your voice is changing, but your breath still smells the same.”

Marsh Rat made a similar sound by placing his hand under his armpit and using his arm as a lever. That was a call to arms, because the rest of us began to belch as loudly as possible or pop air in our cheeks or armpits to assert our manly presence. We probably sounded more like a bunch of sick frogs than the virile, fearless men we viewed ourselves as being.

Mudge went out of her way not to appear ladylike, except when it came to the issue of flatulation. She arrived late and when she figured out what was going on, she

screached her brakes in a loud, piercing sound, but that was as much wind as she was willing to break.

Booger put down his bike and walked out in front of us. So far, aside from McNasty, we had only arm-pumping-fake farts to contend with. But we knew we had much more to dread from Booger. If his nickname hadn't been Booger, he would have been the King of Farts. He was the master. It was like Meadowlark Lemon dribbling a basketball, or Peggy Fleming on ice. He lifted one leg and cut a huge one. Oowe, it was nasty!

Then, he lifted his other leg without anchoring the first and did another—a double whammy. Then Booger mercilessly fanned it in our direction. I looked over at Mudge and she had hidden her face under her arm. Too much boyhood for her.

We all boomed and made catcalls, but we were cheering inside. I mean, no kid alive could cut the cheese like Booger Masterson.

Epar made the mistake of trying to upstage him. He was a smart kid, who wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. But at that age, we didn't recognize his potential. I mean, for one thing, he wore a flattop. No self-respecting kid in town wore a flattop. We all had butches, except for Atlas, who grew his hair long and parted it like an adult. But Atlas was "cool," outgoing and athletic, which in turn meant he was accepted. I don't even know who Epar found to cut his hair. He came from a large Catholic family and rumor had it it was his mother. This led to even further desecration of his image.

He said, "Hey, you guys, wait'll you hear this!" He gave a drum roll by thumping the flat side of his fingernails against his air filled cheeks. He wiggled his fanny as if he

were doing the hula, paused and lifted one leg, like Booger had done. But all of a sudden, instead of a bang, we heard the Hershey squirts.

“Oowe!” we all said in unison. We knew what had happened. This was confirmed by the forlorn look on Epar’s face, which very nearly turned to tears. He tried not to let on that anything was wrong. Instead he slipped past us, while keeping his backside out of view. He walked his bike, stepping backwards for about twenty yards, then turned, hopped on his bike and rode home to change his pants.

Those of us who were left looked at one another and it was written on our collective faces, once we gasped in enough fresh air, that we wanted to go into the park in the worst way. We were invigorated by the weather, Epar’s embarrassing *faux pas* and our freedom from school. But no one had the nerve. We exchanged dares, double-dares, flung jeers and all known reference to chickens: “Chicken liver!” “Chicken feathers!” and, finally, the turn of phrase we had been working our way up to all along, “Chicken shit!”

All of us, that is, except for RW. It wasn’t that RW was unwilling to trespass. It was just that he had a sentimental attachment to chickens, given that his family’s livelihood was tied to raising fricassees. He had been taught to revere them, not to mention that after our conversion of paned glass to rubble at the toy factory, he was noticeably sensitive to issues related to the well being of his backside.

This was all the more interesting since the union of switch and trouser were more common in his case than for most of us. If he hated it so much, why did he always end up getting his butt whipped? I don’t think it was because his parents were stricter than

any of the other parents, but had more to do with the fact that once RW gave in to temptation, he reveled in it and lost sight of its consequences.

On this particular day, however, we weren't drawn by the lure of the glass, such as we had been a few months earlier when we celebrated the closing of the toy factory. Instead, we were drawn by the prospect of entering the building through one of the doors boarded up by what looked like relatively thin sheets of plywood. It appeared to us from outside the stonewall that surrounded the park that security was pretty lax.

Farley, a fat-dirty-blond kid, who was named after the Postmaster General of the United States because he collected stamps, attended St. Anthony's Institute, the local Catholic school, along with me and two of the other boys. "Listen, you guys!" he said. "The nails on that old piece of plywood are already beginning to rust and the wood is rotten. We could pull 'em off and be inside in less than a minute."

Farley was considered to be one of the smart kids, which I found myself resenting. He skipped from third to fourth grade, which was no big deal, since the two grades met together. To be honest, I thought I was just as smart as he was, as were several of the other kids. The thing about Farley was that he was a smart kid who was willing to admit he was smart. The rest of us were more hesitant to own up to anything that resembled even a flicker of native intelligence. It wasn't "cool."

No one made that sort of accusation about Kenny. He was exempt from all charges of being smart.

At his prodding, we propped up our bikes against the stone wall and climbed over, nicking and scratching ourselves on the brambly bushes on the other side. We worked our way through the tall, grassy brush towards the low rise building and got brambles

stuck to our pants, socks and shoelaces. The building joined at an apex and spread out in three directions—one for each of the doctors who had occupied the park.

We could have gotten in more easily from the Main Street side, which faced the traffic, but our approach lessened the chances we would be spotted by one of our parents or someone who would rat on us. Besides, no self-respecting kid would have gone in the easy way. That wouldn't be "cool." In those days, being "cool" was among the highest priorities.

Marsh Rat, a light skinned, pudgy kid, sort of a cream puff and the youngest of us said, "Hey, you guys! Do you think there's ghosts in there? My big brother says there's ghosts."

We all knew that Marsh Rat's big brother had dark brown eyes because he was full of shit, right up to his eyebrows. But somewhere within the confines of our most private thoughts, we were afraid he might be onto something.

None of us wanted to admit that it was fear of the supernatural that made us hesitate, but I for one was relieved when it came out in the open, so the possibility could be freely discussed--sort of like when your mom dismisses the notion of intruders, but leaves the light on in the hallway, just in case.

"No," Farley said. "Besides ghosts don't come out in the daytime." Since everyone acknowledged his being an authority on all things intellectual, we were ready to accept his word.

Then Marsh Rat quipped, "Some kids from Espy School got run off from here last Halloween, just when they was about to throw paint on the building. Someone or some 'thing' howled at 'em!" A hush came over the group.

McNasty broke the silence. "You mean they heard wood creak and got pansy-assed and ran away."

Marsh Rat held his ground. "There's ghosts in there! I don't care what you say, Kenny. I'm the one who lives next door. That building *is* haunted and it's *haunted* both day *and* night. I swear!"

Booger mocked Marsh Rat's remarks in a high-pitched tone, as if he were a girl. "There's ghosts in there all right! It's haunted both day *and* night." Then he added in a manly tone, "If you've got so much hair on your ass, Kenny, why don't you go in there and show us?"

We all paused and wondered if they'd come to blows. It was obvious that McNasty was considering how to respond. You never knew quite what to expect of Booger. He was so erratic that he was capable of just about anything and I'm sure Kenny was weighing the possibility that he would fight back.

But it proved much easier to combat Booger's words than his farts. McNasty shoved him in the chest. "There's nothing that riles up ghosts more than a fat ass!" McNasty said. He looked over Booger's shoulder, down his back. "And you've got the perfect specimen. Why don't you just back in there and gas 'em to death!"

Booger replied, "It's better to be fat in the ass than between the ears, like you, Kenny."

We all knew McNasty couldn't ignore this. He turned bright red. His nostrils flared.

Kenny raised his clenched fists. He pulled his arm back to throw a punch. Just then a rock RW had picked up from beside the goldfish pond and thrown at the medical

building went whizzing by. He threw like a girl and none of us thought it would get there. We stopped what we were doing to watch it. It kept sailing and sailing, as if it were floating, and went right between two of the boards, smashed into a sunny little pane and made the infectious sound of shattered glass.

We were thrown into a frenzy. We fanned out and attacked the building from all sides. Kenny, Farley, RW, Atlas, Marsh Rat, and the little tom-girl, Mudge, all started throwing rocks at the windows. Most of them pinged off the plywood, but every third or fourth one struck glass as we moved in closer. Each breaking pane made a pinging sound. It was like throwing softballs at china plates at the Hardin County Fair, only this time it was free, and while there were no stuffed animals to win, the shattering of the broken glass was enough of a prize to keep us going.

Sometime between the time when RW threw the first stone and the moment when every shard of glass lay on the ground, McNasty rode a few doors down and got a crowbar out of his uncle's garage. He and Atlas, the strongest kid in the group, were soon at the door, prying the wood loose. About then Mikey Fernbank pulled up out front, through the circular driveway where McNasty had left the gate open when he went to get the crowbar. He sat there in his dark blue Dodge convertible with his girlfriend and honked until he got our attention.

McNasty looked over to see what was going on.

Mikey yelled, "Hey, you pussy wimps, get the hell out of there! That's private property."

We didn't know if McNasty would fight or flee. The rest of us would have flown, but McNasty was not known for backing down. Mikey was bigger than any of us, but

McNasty was tough, stubborn and prideful. After assessing the situation in what I featured as his pea-sized brain McNasty said, "Screw it! It's only Fern-dung. I can take him. Let's go on in."

We were about to go inside, when Fern-dung upped the ante by revving his engine and giving McNasty the finger behind a book, in such a way that his girlfriend, who was practically sitting on his lap, couldn't see what he was doing.

"Hey, you little twerps!" He yelled between tromps on the accelerator. "Every one of you's going to get an ass kicking tonight," he shouted. "Even you, Mudgie."

Mudge looked away. She may have been able to hold her own in a fight, but was sheepish when it came to conversation.

While Mikey revved his engine, Kenny flashed back the finger from a perch on top of the crowbar then resumed pulling off the plywood, hardly missing a beat.

I heard Mikey's car door open, then slam shut, and I'm sure Mikey would have come over and pounded McNasty or been pulverized by him, except that Suzie Pendleton, the head cheerleader—a well stacked senior, who was wearing Fern-dung's bright red and white letter sweater--was growing impatient.

Epar told us, when he returned in dry shorts and clean pants that he had heard her say, "C'mon, let's get out of here. You remember what happened to me here, don't you?"

Rumor had it that she'd been putting out for Mikey and perhaps he had more invigorating things in mind than kicking the shit out of us. He yelled, "All right, you little twerps! Don't say I didn't warn ya!" then peeled out with a deafening squeal, trailing smelly blue-gray smoke, as he drove off. We stood in a momentary daze.

None of the rest of us would have gone inside, but McNasty wouldn't relent. With McNasty in command and Marsh Rat in the lead, we crawled cautiously over the windowsill. I reassured myself that McNasty could even bully ghosts.

I was surprised at how dank and dusty it was, even on this bright, clear day. Dust particles danced in the sunrays that snuck in through the gaps in the slats. All the while, I had an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I didn't want to admit this to my friends. I knew I would be ridiculed. Instead, I tried to find a distraction, something that would take my mind off my fears. I had learned this technique when looking at my wallpaper at night, while trying to get to sleep.

"Where to now?" Farley said. "We're inside."

Farley said, "When I broke my arm two summers ago, I went down this way to get an X-ray." He pointed. "Let's see what it looks like now."

I can't remember where Mudge was, but I know she wasn't last. I think that might have been RW, who professed to be having pangs of conscience—or more likely, second thoughts about getting his butt whipped.

"Wow, look at this," Atlas said. "I remember coming down this hallway to see Doctor White, when I broke my leg sliding into second base."

"Are you sure it wasn't when you came in to get your nut checked?" Farley asked.

Atlas was good natured and jovial about his affliction, "You're right. It coulda been," he replied with a bright smile on his face. His manner and athleticism deflected ridicule.

We reunited at the center of the apex, which was built in the shape of an A-frame and had once been the reception area. We then headed down Doctor Schultz' wing. Even though it was no more rundown or full of dust and cobwebs than any other, it seemed to repel us. We were headed that direction and committed to going that way, but it was pretty obvious that no one wanted to go any farther. But, then again, none of us would admit it.

We got down on our hands and knees and crawled. Mudge took the lead.

RW, who was next in line behind Mudge turned his head towards us and said in a low voice, "Shh! I hear something."

"What is it? What do you think it is?" Epar said. We couldn't see his face because of the darkness, but we could hear the trembling in his voice.

"Epar, don't shit your pants again," McNasty chortled from the rear.

"I didn't shit my pants," he replied. "I went home to use the toilet and flush down my favorite turd, Kenny McNealy. I'm surprised you've already climbed out of the sewer."

We halted. I don't know whether we were more scared of the ghosts at that point or the outraged bully in the rear.

"Wait'll I get you outside," McNasty said. "You're gettin' an ass kickin' the minute we see daylight!"

McNasty's comments would normally have broken the tension, but they didn't. There was something unsettling about where we were, what we were doing, where we were headed, something I couldn't define. I felt nauseous and I hadn't been sick in months.

Atlas said, "Hey, you guys. Look over there . . . over there in the middle of those boxes." It looked like two chairs covered with sheets. In the middle of one were two green eyes that seemed to be floating in the darkness.

I said, "Holy shit! Do you see that, RW?" He had been crawling next to me. I turned to see his reaction and he was gone. Then I looked around and everyone was either gone or on their way out of the building.

However much we hesitated coming into the building, we rushed out. We hurried so fast that when McNasty slowed to negotiate the exit, the rest of us piled up on top of one another like cars in a fog. We desperately tried to scramble out through the window we had opened, but kept running into one another. Marsh Rat knocked another piece of plywood loose by lying on his back and kicking it with his feet. We fled out the door. Then, most of the other guys, including Mudge, beat me over the fence. I know because I tore my pants and cut my knee and there was no one left to help me. They were scattering on their bikes.

Booger, who was the last one out, appeared calm, even though his pulse could have been raging. What he said was, "It was just a damn stray cat." He yelled this as I rode off on my bike, my knee spewing blood. ". . . a white one." It smarted so badly I couldn't think clearly about whether or not he was telling the truth. My pants were stuck to my knee with oozing blood. I still had that queasy feeling and fear in the back of my brain that refused to be quelled by Booger's assurances. He joked so much it was hard to know when to believe him.

Cat, rat, dog, or ghost, we had broken into the park, smashed the windows, tore off the plywood and been accosted by Mikey Fernbank, who would make sure our

parents found out about it. I had torn my good pants that I had been told not to wear to play in on my day off, none of which boded well for me. True, Epar probably had two ass kickings coming, but as I lay in bed that evening fretting over the consequences of the days' activities, the prospects for my retribution remained the deepest and darkest of them all.