

Andrew Zettler  
6427 83<sup>rd</sup> Place  
Cabin John, MD 20818  
Ph: (240) 372-1670  
E-mail: ADZettler@gmail.com

62,000 words  
World rights

## BETWEEN THE CHAIRS

### Chapter One

#### Ruler Of The Skies

I have but simple pleasures, and the simplicity of my needs has been on display relentlessly in the weeks leading up to my eighth birthday. An ordinary kite, that's all I wish - an ordinary kite with one small twist, an extra ball of string to go with it. Not just *any* ball of string. Something BIG. Something industrial. Something to match my ambitious plans! Everyone knows that a standard kite comes pre-packaged with a grossly insufficient rationing of string, and I need more. Actually ... I need *a lot* more.

As I ponder this important fact I spy my mother carefully vacuuming a patch of living room floor. It's the least trod upon carpet in our home. Hallowed ground reserved for company and formal occasions, and it's maintained with a fastidiousness that would shame the head groundskeeper of a major league ballpark. I consider the pattern of her carefully hewn vacuum tracks and decide to pose my important question from just outside the freshly mown turf.

“Mom?” ... Nothing ... “Mom?” The vacuum slows its whirring. “Mom, I was just wondering if you were aware that tomorrow is my birthday?”

As the fifth of her six children I consider this a question of no small import. Look, I have six of quite a few things, from matchbox cars to marbles, and even I'm not entirely sure I can keep each and every one of their details perfectly straight. So, my policy is simple - never make assumptions when you're the fifth of anything.

“*Yes, honey*, I know it's your birthday. You're getting to be a pretty big boy, aren't you?”

I'm relieved for the affirmation and also for the praise of my growth plates, but I have little time to exchange pleasantries. In the next forty-eight hours I mean to challenge the limits of the atmosphere with nothing more than a thin patch of brightly colored plastic, two sticks, and a length of string long enough to gain the attention of NASA. My time grows short.

The first thing you need to understand is that birthday tradition in my house runs like clockwork. Once every 365 days per year you're entitled to freedom from chores of any kind, final say in what's prepared for dinner, and an absolute choice of dessert. Most importantly, at the end of the meal your place at the table is bestowed with a single parental gift. Siblings at times will meekly add to the tally, but on their budgets, this usually takes the form of hand-made cards inscribed with crayon, macaroni noodles glued to colored construction paper, or popsicle sticks glued together into the shape of a birthday cake. They say it's the thought that counts, but I'm going to be eight now. I'm closing in on double digits. I no longer have room for sentimentality, only matters of flight.

I waved goodbye to sentimentality exactly four months ago when I made the very public announcement at the nightly dinner table that I should henceforth be addressed by my formal and given name of Andrew. *Andy* is too whimsical, I noted to all who would listen. Andy connotes a man destined for sitting on park benches clearly marked with signs warning of “Wet Paint.” A man who fritters away countless hours chewing stalks of hay with his hands affixed to bib overalls and an *aw shucks* grin on his face. Or worse, a man not very likely to be taken seriously by the aerospace community.

Could an aimless “Y” derail a life destined for pertinence? Only an Andrew could know I reason, and so, after a lengthy and sleepless night spent practicing a signature ending with my rightful suffix of “R-E-W” I emerged a man of singular purpose.

That purpose is to fly a kite higher than one has ever gone before. To push a drugstore novelty item to the limits of its engineering. To kiss the heavens and challenge the mighty eagle in its flight. In this I will not be denied.

There is, however, one significant hurdle that blocks my path, and that is the simple fact that I don’t *actually* own a kite. At least not yet anyway, but I’m not worried about this. I know that in less than twelve hours it will be my turn to mock the very notion of taking trash to the corner. My turn to give my brothers and sisters that knowing and smug glance that leaves no doubt that I will not be lifting even a small pinky finger to wash a dish, or clean up after the dog in the yard today. It will be my turn to declare in royal tone that we will be having fried chicken for dinner just because I like it. My turn to decide that double-decker chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream is the perfect way to wash it all down. Yes, it will be *my* birthday! What’s more, I have left no doubt that when the last drumstick has finally settled, and the last dessert crumb has finally been whisked away by

a polite napkin, all I ask is an ordinary kite. An ordinary kite with one small twist – that extra ball of string to go with it.

I've made my case quite clear. I've lobbied my mother with diagrams, descriptions, keenly one-sided discussions on the vagaries of string, and daily reminders that were carefully positioned as casual, though in truth, they were anything but.

She says, "*we'll see,*" but I know now that her resistance has grown thin. Perhaps she was thinking something more sensible. A pair of pants? Some shoes? But I'm not buying. I may not have been on this planet for long, but I have come to form the very strong opinion that items dispensed so freely by the Red Cross to natural disaster victims have no place intruding on birthday dreams.

No, I'll sleep well tonight, secure in my knowledge that somewhere, carefully hidden in the bowels of my parent's bedroom closet, there rests a kite, and beside that kite rests an extra ball of string, and soon they will be mine.

It is not, however, my birthday yet, and this leaves me vulnerable, and little more than a walking chore magnet if I continue to wander so seemingly idle around the house. There is a mantra that hangs in the air around here, and it simply states, *if you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean*. You know that old saying about eluding a hungry lion? Well, I learned it firsthand at an early age. You don't need to be the most fleet of foot to escape its jaws, only faster than the person next to you. And so it goes with the carnivorous tide of daily household chores. Those that choose open and noticeable spaces to lounge about always fall prey first.

As I stand alone with that thought, somewhere, deep within, a soft alarm bell begins to sound urging me to wake from my miniature trance and move onward. Andrew, snap

out of it I chide myself. You're entirely too close to the kitchen! But I'm too late.

Mother's voice rings out from the living room, "Andrew, your father will be home soon. Please go set the table for dinner."

Wow, I walked right into that one and I have nobody to blame but myself. I could have been outside. I could have been upstairs in my room. I could have been quietly pretending to scour schoolbooks for scraps of parentally approved knowledge, but instead, I fell asleep at the switch and walked right into a chore. On the bright side though, she did at least extend me the dignity of my "R-E-W".

Walking into the kitchen, I begin the nightly array of plates and utensils. Is it knives on the right and forks on the left, or the other way around? This has all been explained to me before, but I can never positively remember. If they're hungry enough they'll find a way to work past any indiscretions in my silverware pattern I explain to myself.

The kitchen table beneath my hands is a darkly stained sturdy oak and comes with six equally sturdy matching chairs around it. Comfortable and well worn, if it had a face I imagine its brow would be a bit furrowed, but wise. As though it could spin a yarn about the Dust Bowl days, or the trials of some long-forgotten western migration in search of steady farm work.

I know its surface well, but I don't lay claim to any of its chairs. I may be the fifth of six children around here, but I am also number seven in a family of eight, and that means that I'm the master of all I survey, as long as I survey it from my #7 stool wedged almost as an afterthought at the far end of the table each night.

Chivalry and gender play permanent roles in this kitchen, and under their careful watch, each of my three sisters is guaranteed life-long chair status along with my parents.

The sixth and remaining chair is deeded to my oldest brother. This leaves Middle Brother, two years my elder, and me, the youngest boy, relegated to the fringes. Pressing our faces against the family glass in hopes of one day knowing what dinner might taste like with the benefit of back support.

“Don’t forget to fill the water glasses,” mother’s voice interrupts, and for the moment, I cease pondering the important matters of fairness and seating distribution.

There she stands, her back to me now, working hastily at the stove and putting the finishing touches on a dish that answers to any name you care to call it. It carries itself without a hint of arrogance, and yet walks with a quiet confidence that says, I’m quick to make, I’m universally pleasing to the palate, and my ingredients require nothing more than the change you may find under your sofa cushion. I am ground hamburger meat, I am a green pepper, and I am anything else you happen to have lying around the house. Salt me if you wish, dress me up in ketchup, it matters not. *What’s that?* You’ve got a potato with nothing to do? Slice him up and bring him along! *Good Old Whatever It Is* welcomes all with open arms, and he always entertains his guests from a black skillet.

He has a cousin as well, but we rarely speak his name in polite circles. You can see the family resemblance at a distance, but look closely. Look past the phony exterior of green pepper and whatever else is lying around the house and you will see for yourself that he is nothing more than a fistful of hot dogs cut in to small sections. He doesn’t come around often, but when he does, it always seems to coincide with the homestretch between my father’s paychecks. Like a buzzard circling at the first sign of a fiscal tremor, he always waits to pounce, and for that I despise him.

The glasses have been topped off and thoroughly filled with iced now, the napkins

have been folded and placed squarely beside each waiting plate, and the rustling of brothers and sisters can now be heard converging on the kitchen from destinations far and wide.

My father will be home soon, and like fellow members of a hungry animal pack honing in on a fresh kill, they too sense that another opportunity to feed is near.

We are comprised of the same DNA, my siblings and I. We hang stockings side-by-side each Christmas, walk the same sidewalks to catch school buses each morning, and regularly exchange pleasantries when passing one another in the upstairs hall, and yet, there is an unspoken tension that permeates our communal air at all times - and that is the competitive quest for a single shared food supply.

Like a boxer preparing to enter his ring, I must block out the distractions of “birthday” and “kite” now and ready myself for the hungry sparring that lies ahead. Second helpings go to the most cunning of fork and the fleet of mouth, so it pays to be focused and mentally prepared. With my table-setting chores complete, I retreat to the family room to await the big man’s arrival home.

The fearlessness and presumption of youth are squarely mine, and so, as I always do the moment I sniff any sign of vacancy, I climb into my father’s soft brown recliner as though I, and not he, had fully paid for it. When you view the world from a #7 stool, you grow keenly aware of superior seating vacancies wherever they may be, and though it’s always on borrowed time, I seek out the warm confines of his magnificent chair at every opportunity.

We repeat the same silent dance the moment he returns home to reclaim his throne at the end of each workday. He silently casts a knowing glance my way, and with a small,

but dismissive sweep of his hand, I am once again banished to the sofa on the opposite side of the room. The sun rises, the sun sets. The world rotates on its axis one full revolution, and once again, like clockwork, I am vanquished.

Never deterred, I nestle into his recliner with the defiance of a grizzled squatter and prepare to resume my role in the absurdist play that he and I reenact each evening for our own entertainment - my Rosencrantz to his Guildenstern, his roadrunner to my coyote.

I could wait for the sound of tires clearing the carport just opposite our red brick family room wall to confirm his arrival home, but it's hardly necessary. I command a network of informants that when combined are far superior to my own ears. Their body language alone will tell me all I need to know. My operatives answer to the names of Tips, Shultz, Puff, and Lucky, and they work for little more than a handful of kibble and a well-timed scratch between the ears.

They're an unlikely team, but together always seem to get the job done. Tips, our knee-high black and white mutt donated from a litter down the street, will sound the first alert with a purposeful head raise the moment she senses his right-hand turn into driveway.

Shultz, the adopted German Shepard stray with the countenance of a Police Dog ten years on the force, but a fear of thunderstorms that sends him climbing into empty bathtubs at the first clap of thunder, will run lead intercept with tail wagging to greet him at the side door.

Puff, the grey housecat, who once grew so dissatisfied with the dry food poured into her bowl that she mounted the kitchen stove and pulled a working turkey carcass from a simmering soup kettle, will pretend not to care one way or the other that my father



is home, but will saunter behind Shultz, nevertheless, as though her trip to the door were coincidental and that she had things to do there anyway.

Lucky, the striped asthmatic tabby found discarded by a busy highway two years prior, rounds out the squad, but will generally just observe from afar. He contributes less than the others, but a team is only as strong as its weakest link, and so, he does what he can.

And now the alarm is going up, I can see it plainly. Tips' neck muscles are starting to flex, her small wet nose is starting to twitch, and there it is now, her head is clearly upright. Shultz springs for the side door with Puff meandering leisurely at a cool distance. Lucky sits perfectly still and wheezing in the far corner. As for me, I wait.

I hear my father make his way from the carport through the laundry room door, stride through the small adjoining den, and make a hard right into the family room. I decide a different tact may prolong my hold on his prized chair this time, and so, after scrambling forth a brief, "hi, Dad", I quickly position a nearby section of newspaper at forehead level so as to avoid direct eye contact.

"Hello son, how was school today?" He inquires. I peer over my sports page and return an underwhelming "fine, it was fine."

In truth, my day at school got off to a rocky start, but if my seven, almost eight years in life have taught me anything, it's that questions as to the status of one's day or one's health are almost always rhetorical. *Fine, not bad, no complaints, never been better* - you pick your poison. All are acceptable responses, but leave misery and truth as far from your reply as possible.

Does he really need to know that Shultz followed me to the bus stop this morning

and devoured the brown bag lunches of two fifth graders and one sixth grader while we all had our attention turned to a hastily arranged game of four square?

Does he really need to know that while the victims fell to their knees and pondered sandwich bags filled with nothing more than mayonnaise smears and Wonderbread crumbs, I watched in horror and tried to assume a stance that distanced myself from my very own German Shepard and faithful friend?

Does he really need to know that despite all of my attempts to appear as though I had just been introduced to Shultz, he followed me on to the bus anyway, and would not leave my side no matter how much the bus driver pushed and pleaded?

Does he really need to know that while I looked on with mouth agape, the entire bus had to be redirected to the front of our house so that mom could board the vehicle and coax Shultz from the back seat next to me?

“Nope, not my dog. Never seen him. I guess he just liked the smell of your sandwiches fellas,” I had lamely suggested.

*No*, he does not need to know these things. Move along folks, nothing to see here. School was fine, just fine.

Fortunately, he seems to accept my simple reply at face value and moves down the hallway in search of mom, and perhaps, a quick pre-dinner snack. I lower the paper as he disappears and marvel at my good fortune. Like a rodeo cowboy in the throes of a once-in-a-lifetime ride, I’m still sitting squarely in the saddle and in disbelief.

He’ll be back soon, of that much I’m sure, and if there’s any hope of extending my recliner stay I’ll need some kind of angle. Only one comes to mind. Its chances of working are remote, but it’s all I’ve got. *Read*. That’s right, pick up the paper and read it

like never before. Not the comics, not the sports page, but something with real weight behind it. Something dry and painfully serious like the World News, or an economic round-up from the Business section.

Surely he wouldn't interrupt a young mind in its quest for learning. After all, he fills the house with books himself, and he, always the sensible and well-trained civil engineer, is the one who queries his offspring at random intervals as to the revolutions per second of a lawn mower blade, or the feet above sea level of such and such city. He, of all people, would certainly yield the recliner to a young scholar plying his trade.

As I congratulate myself on this promising realization, I hear the sound of his footsteps returning from the kitchen. With little time to act I toss aside the comfort and familiarity of my sports page and blindly grab for the most ominous section of newsprint I can find. Yes, the stock quotes! Nothing but a sea of meaningless consonants and symbols, but there's no time to turn back now. I sense his shadow in the far corner of the room and clutch the corners of the New York Exchange as though my life depended on it. For good measure, I begin to murmur financial sounding terms under my breath and move my lips in exaggerated fashion.

"Ahem." My father clears his throat, and then adds in a brief whistle to further express his point. Words are never necessary between he and I. A clearing of the throat by itself means move it along. A clearing of the throat followed by a brief whistle means move it along, and while you're at it, take your phony Business section with you.

I lower the paper and there he stands towering above me, a plate of saltines adorned with roughly cut cheddar cheese slices in one hand, and a cold beer in the other. I knew coming in that my chances of retaining the seat were slim, and so, with little more than

an, *oh well, I gave it my best shot shrug*, I retreat to the sofa. The Business section I leave behind.

“I understand Shultz tried to make his way into school with you this morning.” He says with a smile, clearly having been debriefed on the matter by my mother.

He laughs out loud as I explain that he heard right, though his laughter strikes me as an odd response given the seriousness of the matter. Perhaps he suffers from the same habit of laughing at inappropriate moments that I noted in Mother this morning as she attempted to convince Shultz off of my bus with the assistance of a bone.

As he sets in on the newspaper I left behind, I turn my attention through the sliding glass door that leads from the family room out into the backyard. With daylight savings time still several weeks away, the last gasp of winter’s evening shadows are beginning to appear. The sky above is a wisp of clouds framed against deep shades of blue and gray with a sprinkling of stars beginning to break through in the distant heavens. On the horizon, the sun is busy putting its finishing touches on another day. It’s an open sky of limitless possibility. A place where dreams and ambition are welcomed with open arms, and proper seats are always at the ready for all to enjoy. Could there be anything better than launching a kite of your very own into something so vast? Something better than demanding that the world stand still and take notice? The answer, of course, is no.

High overhead a sliver of moon begins to shine through, and as if by well-trained reflex I quickly work to calculate the amount of string it would take to safely land a brand new kite on its cratered surface.

From behind, my mother’s voice rings out ... DINNER! ... DINNER’S READY!

## Chapter Two

### The Showdown

A mass convergence begins to lay siege to the kitchen as my siblings make their final descent on the dinner table. The term fashionably late does not apply to mealtimes here, and yet, there is little to be gained in arriving first. The seats are permanently assigned with no hope of redistribution, and absolutely no fork is ever permitted to be raised until every last place at the table is occupied, so I choose to nonchalantly make the scene just as the others settle into place.

No-shows are exceedingly rare, and search parties are always immediately dispatched to retrieve any offending party who misses the mealtime call. Tardiness is not appreciated, and the hungry glares that greet the miserable soul who dares to delay the flow of food are something not soon forgotten.

There are many very intricate layers and rules of engagement that govern time spent at this table, and in spite of my age, I have grown to master their nuances. *Good Old Whatever It Is* sits steaming in a piece of white crockery with a single ladle hanging to the side. To its right is a small serving plate piled high with slices of soft white bread, and on its left, two silver colored metal dishes. One stacked with leftover carrots from the

night before, and the other sadly burdened with boiled peas that were frozen to the core only minutes ago. I have no particular use for these peas, or any other vegetable for that matter, but I will make a great show of eating four, or possibly five of these very soon, being careful to comment on how perfectly prepared they are, and how no meal would be complete without them. I promise you there's a method to my madness. I know all too well that a refusal to eat the nightly vegetable quickly attracts the blinding parental searchlight that swivels from place setting to place setting in search of inappropriate table etiquette or consumptive behavior. Once caught in its glare, dinner privileges for the night are perilously close to being revoked ...

*"No seconds until you eat a helping of lima beans ... that's not a helping, take more!"*

*"Elbows off the table, you're not being raised in a barn!"*

*"No talking with your mouth full!"*

And so on.

The searchlight illuminates all in its path, but as it makes its rounds it also casts momentary shadows of opportunity, and so night after night, when the timing is ripe, I present the most convincing display I can muster in favor of vegetables I loathe.

There will be time to tap dance for the searchlight soon, but first comes the pre-dinner prayer. The menu itself may change around here, but the mandatory words of

thanks never do. Like a roving guillotine blade looking to fall, my father will randomly select one of his children to moderate the holy rhyme as the group chimes in. I look wistfully through the window across from me into the now darkened backyard in hopes of being passed over.

“Andrew, why don’t you start us off?” My father says. I rub my forehead in search of the invisible target that seems to be painted there and clear my throat. I know the meter of the tiny prayer well enough, but in truth, its exact words from start to finish have always eluded me. I could ask, I suppose, but I’ve been faking it for over three years now, and to admit as much after all of this time could induce scorn, or worse, eternal damnation. I’m not sure which, but possibly both. It’s too risky.

Alright, here I go ... ahem ...

“Bless us, O’ Lord, and-deez-eye gifts which we are about to retrieve from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.” I clumsily blurt out in record speed. They can’t correct what they can’t catch, I tell myself.

Out of the corner of my eye I steal a glance toward the head of the table. My father and mother, with their strict Catholic school upbringings, look on at my closing sign of the cross rather suspiciously it seems.

I look for a nod, some kind of affirmation that the garbled mess I’ve just offended God’s ears with will permit the flow of food, when to my relief my father reaches for the main serving ladle to announce that the games have officially begun. Miraculously, the lure of a warm and waiting meal was somehow strong enough to cloak yet another awkward prayer on my part.

Like boxcars creaking along on familiar rails, the serving plates begin to make their way counter-clockwise around the table. I'm one of the final destinations on the route, and so, with great interest, I study each passing stop and nervously fidget as the edible cargo disappears.

Nature has her fundamental laws, and so too does this slowly moving food train. Second helpings of any kind are not to be attempted until each plate at the table has received its first, but time is of the essence. A child's arm that extends for a return trip to any serving dish on the table before his or her plate is cleared is quickly shot down.

The margin for error is thin. Eat too fast, and the searchlight hones in, eat too slow, and you'll end up watching from the sidelines as others polish off the remaining morsels right before your desperate eyes.

"So, tell me about your day," my father says. I say nothing, keeping my eyes keenly trained on *Good Old Whatever It Is* as it moves ever closer. There's no need for me to break my hungry gaze, for like the flow of food, that very same question will also make its way clockwise, one-at-a-time, from one place to the next. With the formality of Parliament in session, my turn to speak will come, but only once I'm recognized by the head of the table.

As my siblings continue taking turns entertaining my parents with talk of long division mastered, clever facts learned in school that day, and the whys and wherefores of this particular friend or that, *Good Old Whatever It Is* finally makes its way to me.

Hmm, not bad I think to myself. It's a little war-torn, a little heavy on the green pepper, and the hamburger meat has been pretty aggressively picked over, but all in all I should be able to put something together here.

"Andrew, what about you?" Says my father, as his voice comes into focus.

"Just ask Shultz how his day was?" My oldest brother chimes in.



Peels of laughter begin to fill the air. For the life of me, I cannot figure how my family is able to find even a shred of humor in my morning debacle, but I decide to take the high road and ignore the comment.

It won't be long now I remind myself. In six hours the indignities of my final day as a desperately kite-less seven year old will be nothing but a memory. Everything will be different then. I know it. I will be eight, I will rule the skies, and my German Shepard will respect my wishes.

Another "fine, my day was just fine" begins to form on my lips, but I stop. Sullen monosyllabic responses to dinner table questions are no way to curry parental favor, and I've worked entirely too hard these many months to position myself for the birthday gift I so desperately need. Now is not the time to jeopardize my efforts.

"Well, I'm getting an 'O' in handwriting," I say with a grasp. I'm greeted with blank stares from both of my parents. Deep down, I know this information is of little use to them. While the older kids bring home report cards with tried and true performance marks like A, B, C or D explaining instantly the teacher's opinion of their work, we in the second grade are granted only cryptic letters from the latter half of the alphabet. "O" for outstanding, "S" for satisfactory, and "N" for ... well, no one is quite sure what the "N" is for, but usually it's the end result of too many homework assignments returned with frown faces drawn in red pen.

"The "O" ... it uh, it stands for outstanding," I manage to awkwardly add, in attempts to break the unimpressed silence that has fallen over the table. Mother snaps to and issues the obligatory, "oh, that's great honey."

I don't know why adults condescend to my "O's". It's not the first time this has happened. Is it my fault that the beginning of the alphabet has been deemed off-limits to me? No. Perhaps the powers-that-be at Saddlebrook Elementary think that our second grade psyches are too fragile to handle any blunt assessment of the academic truth. If I were to bring home an S -, I bet they would have something to say then, I mutter to no

one in particular.

As I say this, the revolving question moves on to Younger Sister who sits self-satisfied in a chair of her very own to my left. As she begins to painstakingly describe the adventures of Big Bird that day, I spy Middle Brother progressing swiftly towards a second helping of *Good Old Whatever It Is*.

Augh, while I've been defending silly little "O's" he's been carving out a huge consumption lead! We both know what's at stake here. There's only room in that serving bowl for one of us to get the second-to-last spoonful, and this is for all the marbles.

The very final helping of anything at the table is almost impossible to achieve without first formally petitioning the room for permission, and it's a risky proposition at best. If even one mouth speaks in dissent, the final serving is thrown into debate, and that debate almost always ends with the moderator, my father, settling the dispute by removing its root cause – he eats it.

We know better than to leave hunger to chance, he and I. The path of least resistance is always the serving *before* the very last one. It's not monitored nearly as closely, and so, we silently jockey for its position as though our life depended on it. My parents seem oblivious to our nightly combat, but it rages just beneath their watchful eyes at every meal.

Of all of my dinnertime adversaries, it's Middle Brother I regard most warily. He too knows the life of a stool-sitter, and the bitterness shows in his face, and on his fork. His arsenal of tricks is formidable, and I have learned much in observing him these past several years. You're not simply born knowing how to perfectly disguise unwanted vegetables under a shield of mashed potatoes. Nor do you master the fine art of concealing similar undesirables in the folds of a napkin without first studying as an apprentice. As Paul Revere is to silver, he is to scavenging.

Like me, he has nothing to lose, and this makes him dangerous. He tap dances civilly before the parental searchlight each night just as I do, but when those lights are

down he plays for keeps.

Never underestimate your adversary. That's the cardinal rule of combat, and yet, there was an afternoon last summer when I violated this principle and paid the ultimate price. We had been left alone to fend for our own lunch Middle Brother and I, and so, had made our way to the refrigerator in hopes of the best. We found it. Inexplicably, there sat on the second shelf four pieces of chicken gloriously nestled in cling wrap. Two thighs, a drumstick, and a wing. We rejoiced at our unexpected find. How quickly our fate had turned. Only minute's prior, we had resigned ourselves to peanut butter, or perhaps, if we were lucky some old cheese sandwiches.

Like competing prospectors who happen upon the same piece of gold simultaneously, an instant and necessary partnership seemed to spring before us.

"I'll go get some plates," he said helpfully.

"Great, let me just get this chicken out!" I answered, in the spirit of teamwork.

Could this unexpected turn of fortune convert two feuding opportunists into allies? It appeared so.

As I made my way triumphantly to the kitchen table with the chicken cradled in my joyous hands, Middle Brother was just applying the finishing touches to two tall glasses of ice water. With utensils and napkins perfectly placed beside each plate, and an empty serving tray centered between us, an air of formality seemed to fill the room. Yes, he was right, this was indeed no ordinary summertime lunch. It was too dignified to simply eat off of a napkin while leaning over the sink, as was our usual habit when mother wasn't looking.

I ceremoniously laid each piece of chicken onto the serving tray and surveyed the scene before me deeply satisfied. With the kitchen empty, we eased ourselves into the chairs that eluded us each night, and made a simultaneous reach for the serving tray.

As our hands began to hover over the exact same piece, the warm glow of our new found partnership began to show.

“You go ahead and have that one,” he said.

“Are you sure? It looked like you had your eye on it,” I protested.

“Absolutely,” he reassured.

At his insistence, I gently placed the honorary first piece on to my plate as he selected one of his own and began to study its outline closely. From the tell-tale blackened stripes and traces of barbecue sauce showing faintly at its sides, it was clearly chicken from the grill, but how could it have slipped under my radar? I had performed a thorough inventory of the refrigerator after dinner the previous night, and had seen no sign of it. Perhaps my father had deemed these pieces underdone, and left them stowed on the hot coals outside to cook longer only to remember them much later.

Yes, that must have been it I thought as I raised my head to announce my clever theory. What I saw still leaves me in horror. Middle Brother now clutched three pieces of chicken in one determined fist. As if in slow motion, he began to lick the complete surface of each, being careful to leave layers of saliva glistening in his wake.

“No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o! What the ... what ... what did you do that for?” I stammered out in anguish.

“I claim these.” He said plainly and without remorse.

I had been lulled into a false sense of security. There was no new spirit of goodwill. No new working together for a greater common need, just wads of spit coating chicken that only moments before had represented a potentially new start in our competitive relations.

Clearly, if there’s anyone at the table here tonight who can find a way to beat me to the second-to-last spoonful of *Good Old Whatever It Is*, it’s him.

Once again, this matter will be settled between the stools, and as we gird for battle the din of chatter that now freely exchanges from chair to chair begins to recede to hollow white noise.

Like cool-handed gunslingers striding down tumbleweed streets at high noon, we carefully eye each other up and down. A spoonful, or perhaps two, of *Good Old*

*Whatever It Is* remains on his plate, but I notice something more, a flash of orange pushed craftily to the inside left corner and it allows me a glimmer of hope. It's a decent-sized piece of carrot, and he'll need to finish that too before making a legal move for more of anything else. It's a long shot, but my plan of attack begins to form.

At first glance, my plate would appear a hopeless cause. A full piece of white bread, five peas, and at least three full spoonfuls of *Good Old Whatever It Is* stand between me and a second helping. This will require quick thinking. With a deft shove of my knife, I roll the entire row of peas into my last clump of potatoes now only lightly dotted with particles of hamburger meat, and as discreetly as possible, shovel the entire mass into my mouth with nothing more than a fork. In the same movement, I craftily raise a napkin with my right hand to conceal my mouth, now bursting at the seams. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and this move was a considerable gamble. Stuffing one's face so blatantly is a fatal breach of etiquette that brings instant dismissal from the table, but my choices were few.

Middle Brother now looks on intently as he skewers his final carrot. From his triumphant smirk, I can see that he interprets the apparent confusion and frantic chewing from my place at the table as a sign that I have fallen into disarray. He seems almost leisurely now, convinced that victory is assured, but he is making one gross miscalculation.

Unlike the nutrient-filled carrot attached to the end of his fork, the slice of bread that now rests alone on my plate qualifies for an obscure loophole in dinnertime rules. Since bread is used as a tool in mopping up unused sauce left behind by the foods that came before it, it does not *technically* prevent a reach for additional helpings. Like a blank Scrabble tile, if cleverly played, it can position its owner for a variety of moves.

I can see it clearly in his demeanor, he is completely oblivious to the masterful stroke I am about to play. With the confident flair of a born showman I reach for the serving spoon that leads to the critically dwindling supply of *Good Old Whatever It Is*.

Middle Brother begins to sputter frantically over bits and pieces of half-chewed carrot and cries out, “hey, he’s still got food on his plate!”

“Just need a little something to help polish off this bread,” I inform the table innocently.

As if victory alone were not enough, Mother sweetens the moment even more as she scolds Middle Brother instantly. “Don’t talk with your mouth full!”

I try to suppress the smug smile that I feel spreading across my face, but it’s no use. Middle Brother smolders from the stool opposite mine. His piercing stare says it all – you may have won this round little brother, but I *will* be back.

I return his stare with the only reply that seems appropriate. I raise another forkful of lukewarm *Good Old Whatever It Is* to my mouth, pause needlessly to blow on it as though it were still hot off the stove, and begin to tauntingly chew it as slowly as humanly possible.

As the spoils of victory celebrate their way down my throat, I wonder to myself if life can possibly get any better. By this time tomorrow, I will sit on this same stool as though it were a throne. The food will flow, double-decker chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream will be waiting in the wings, and when all have had their fill, my mother will rise to retrieve what I have urgently craved these many months – an ordinary kite with that one small twist, an extra ball of string to go with it!

## Chapter Three

### Hail Mary

Suddenly, I hear it. “Hail Mary, full of grace” sings out a voice from the far end of the table. My pleasant daydream comes crashing back to earth as the sounds of my eldest sister, now breaking into the opening salvo of the mandatory post-dinner prayer, begins to fill the air.

*Oh great*, while I’ve been royally musing on the wonders of kitedom I’ve completely lost track of time. My father has long since polished off the final helpings of everything that interested him, and a solemn mood now grips the table.

These nightly rounds of Hail Marys circulate just like the food and conversation before them - clockwise, one-at-a-time around the table, while my siblings and I play the role of contestants on a Catholic game show, each trying to conjure a facial expression more serious and prayerful than the next. Hail Marys and smiles don’t mix well here, and even the hint of a grin immediately attracts suspicion that its wearer must be “up to something.”

The strategies vary from seat to seat, but I’ve found that a vacant neutral expression combined with the hint of a downward head-tilt seems to strike just the right

balance. Not too pious, but just reflective enough to appease the infamous searchlight as it passes.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.” Continues the prayer as it makes its way from seat to seat.

Truth be told, this repetition proves a handy crutch for me, and as I listen to my brothers and sisters take their turns before me, my confidence always grows that I’ll repeat the full prayer flawlessly myself for once. The second grade doesn’t require much use of “blessed art thou” or “thees” or “fruit” anywhere near anybody’s “womb”, so I find myself decidedly out of my element when forced to use them in a sentence, but I always seem to manage when my turn arrives.

As the dust settles on the final Hail Mary, my father brings a close to the evening’s festivities with an, “alright boys, it’s your night for dishes.”

My sisters gleefully exit the kitchen behind my parents to pursue an evening free from dirty pots and pans, while my two older brothers and I remain to clear the debris left behind. The trail of used plates, utensils, and crumpled napkins only minutes before raised at a furious pace by eight separate sets of hands, now lie dormant and dirty. Like a busy mess hall left panting and spent from its last frantic seating of the night, an unfamiliar stillness descends upon the room.

With exactly three boys and three girls at their disposal, my parents believe that major household chores should run in the same manner as the solar system – constant rotation. One night the boys do dishes, the next night, the girls. To lessen the mountain of dirty dishes, I once cleverly campaigned mother for the use of paper plates to streamline the dinner hour, but the idea never picked up any traction. She said I seemed to have a lot



of free time on my hands and must be looking for something to do so I backed off the concept.

Suddenly, a voice calls out from over near the stove. “That’s definitely a soaker.” It’s Middle Brother, now peering into the over-sized black skillet that gave birth to this evening’s batch of *Good Old Whatever It Is*.

I rise from my stool to join him in assessing the damage. Though exceedingly rare, a true soaker is a cooking vessel whose interior surface has grown so caked with burned on residue that only hours spent immersed in soapy dishwater can ever resuscitate its useful life.

I’ll admit, I’m cautiously optimistic, for indeed, if we have a true soaker on our hands it has the power to bestow the precious gift of procrastination on us all. It’s tough to pull off though. I, myself, have many times laid pans impossibly scorched with residue into the sink for a long night’s rest, only to have my father pass by the kitchen and begin a spirited speech on the concept of “elbow grease”. “*You get out an S.O.S pad and put some muscle into it,*” he always explains.

My father is a huge fan of “elbow grease”, and he clearly believes that push-ups are the most direct route to attaining it, because our last conversation on the matter ended with me repeatedly introducing my face to the family room carpet as he counted the repetitions.

It’s always worth a look though. Every now and again you can get one by, so I decide to inspect things for myself. “ Well, I definitely see some pretty burned potato down there by the handle. It probably could use a little time in the water,” I offer up in agreement.

“That’s not a soaker! Put it in the sink and get started,” interjects Big Brother.

“Andy, you clear the plates off the table.”

“Oh, actually it’s And – rew. There’s an R-E-W at the end,” I correct.

I don’t remember participating in any votes on the matter, but Big Brother always anoints himself job foreman whenever work breaks out without my father around to assume the mantle.

He has a very simple motto where sibling relations are concerned – *might makes right*, and he often invokes those words when assuming choice positions around the house while my parent’s attention is diverted.

As a seven, almost eight year old, I am a mere gnat buzzing on the distant horizon of his high school existence - a small entertainment for him to toy with as a cat would a ball of string, only to grow quickly bored.

You’ve heard the expression that discretion is the better part of valor? I have too, and since I have plans on entering the fourth grade in one piece next year, I always make it a point to keep a watchful eye on Big Brother when my parents are not around.

I can still remember the dark day last winter, just prior to bedtime, when Middle Brother announced that a disturbing development was in the works as we brushed our teeth side-by-side in front of the upstairs bathroom mirror:

“You know he’s taken up wrestling, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“You mean ... Oh, uh oh. I don’t see where this is good for us ... not even a little bit.”

Our fears were not unfounded. Within days we found overwhelming ambushes waiting around every corner of the house as Big Brother perfected his latest takedowns and practiced his moves on any small human sacrifice that crossed his path.

Trust me, being contorted into an unwilling human pretzel is demoralizing enough, but when your assailant also takes the time to explain the devastation as it unfolds, it can be particularly damaging to morale. The carnage always began with the same question:

“Where do you think your going?”

“Um, nowhere really, just thought I’d check the mail.”

“I bet I could have you on the ground pinned in less than three seconds.”

“Yeah, I bet you could.”

I thought agreeing with him would serve as a diversionary tactic, or that it would take the fun out of it for him, only it never played out that way as what usually came next was a sweeping movement aimed at my legs, one arm pressed behind my back, and my face pressed down on the floor in what was announced as a “Half Nelson”. From there, the play-by-play would begin as he worked through his repertoire:

“Now, if I were to put you in a *Full Nelson*, like this, that would be illegal.”

“Yeah ... oww ... I can ... see ... where that would be ... uugh ... illegal.”

“So, what I would do instead is cross-face you like this, and then pin you like this.”

“Uumph!”

“But, what I would *never* be able to do is an illegal Chicken Wing where I put your arm behind your back and twist it like this.”

“Again, Ow.”

I don't know his overall won-lost record outside of the house, but he was undefeated against six year olds last year. Fortunately, for now he seems occupied in one of the upper food cabinets by the stove. What worries me though is that I can almost see the gears working in his brain. As usual, what he's up to is anyone's guess, but sure enough, it's not long before I find out.

“Hey, Andy, how'd you like to get out of doing the dishes?” He inquires.

“It's not Andy, it's ... *never mind*. Yeah, I'm listening. What do you mean?”

“See this bottle of Tabasco Sauce? If you drink the *entire* thing, you can leave now.”

Middle Brother turns from the sink to face me, clearly interested and approving of the entertaining proposition he just overheard.

“An *entire* bottle of hot sauce? Are you kidding? No way!” I protest.

Let me just say, I believe my “no” was rather emphatic, but predictably it's interpreted as merely an opening to negotiations by Big Brother who begins to sweeten the deal.

“This bottle, *plus* five dollars.”

“You're crazy, there's no way I'm drinking that - even a teaspoon would burn your face off!”

“Not if you gulp it all at once, it can only burn your mouth if you sip it like a drink.”

As I ponder the validity of his statement, a dark horse enters the race from the rear. Unable to contain his morbid curiosity and lust for a show at my expense any longer, Middle Brother blurts out an absolute show-stopper.

“I tell you what, if you drink that bottle I’ll forgive every penny of the seventeen dollars you owe me.”

If a record could suddenly skip in the background, it would do so, twice. Big Brother, momentarily taken aback by the sheer power of the unexpected offer that now hangs in the air, goes from shock to restrained glee as he tries to reign in his emotions and regroup for the kill.

“Even better, that’s a night off from dishes, five bucks from me, *and* you get to walk from his seventeen dollar debt. Are you kidding? You’d be a fool not to!”

I hate to admit it, but he might almost have a point. It took me the better part of two years to rack up my debt to Middle Brother in the first place – a school lunch here, a quick summertime loan sought frantically to the tune of the ice cream man only a few streets away there – it all adds up, and he never forgets one small cent of it.

Ancient mariners used the stars to chart the seasons, I simply use the nightly reminders of my debt that come from the bunk bed above me each night in our shared room.

It all started the May before last when I impulsively decided on two consecutive Fridays that I could no longer take the oppression of brown bag lunches, so I hastily borrowed just enough from Middle Brother to treat myself to the far superior school lunch of a pizza rectangle, a chocolate milk, and an upside down pear slice swimming in a sticky preservative syrup. Soon thereafter it began:

“You owe me two dollars. Goodnight.”

*It won't be long now. Summer vacation is almost here.*

“You owe me five dollars. Goodnight.”

*I can't believe we have to go back to school already!*

“You owe me nine dollars. Goodnight.”

*I sure hope Santa Claus got that note I sent.*

“You owe me twelve dollars. Goodnight.”

*It won't be long now. Summer vacation is almost here.*

“You owe me sixteen dollars. Goodnight.”

*I can't believe we have to go back to school already!*

“You owe me seventeen dollars. Goodnight.”

Ugh ... like a well-trained accountant's parrot, he squawks the state of our financial affairs nightly. What's worse, my economic prospects are dim, and I see little chance to dig out of this hole any time soon.

It didn't have to come to this. I've heard word on the street that some kids are getting allowances out there. I even gingerly explored the concept with my parents, but they seemed intent on redirecting my queries to the fact that there's a roof over my head, and that food keeps appearing at mealtimes for my consumption.

Big Brother, sensing my weakening resolve, begins to reach for his ace in the hole. It's one thing to talk about five dollars, but it's another thing altogether to actually hold it. When you have zero dollars, and your annual income also happens to be zero dollars, five dollars is the equivalent of a suitcase filled with unmarked large bills, and he knows this.

"Five dollars, right here," he says, as he removes a lone minty green bill from his front right jeans pocket and begins to smooth it on the kitchen counter just within my reach.

"Plus, my seventeen," reminds Middle Brother from his place at the sink.

As their coaxing stares penetrate my body I reach out and grasp the five-dollar bill with my nearest thumb and forefinger. One gallant gulp is all it would take I tell myself. One giant gulp of freedom - freedom from worldly debt, freedom from dishwashing, and the freedom that comes in controlling the princely sum of this five dollars.

There they stand, the two of them, with matching wry grins on their faces. If I squint my eyes just right, I can almost see a third grin joining the fray, or is it a concerned frown of disappointment? It's Abraham Lincoln peering back at me from the center of his

five-dollar portrait. His expression is difficult to read, but what does he know of my struggles anyway? He may have had a house divided against itself, but I've got my own cross to bear, and at the moment, it's a mountain of dishes that need washing and a seventeen-dollar debt that leaves me awake at night as my creditor sleeps soundly only a few feet above my head. I've decided Tabasco is going down, but I need better terms. To test the waters of compromise I float a mild protestation.

"The whole bottle? It's not worth it. A half bottle, *maybe* would be humanly possible, but not a *whole* bottle."

Clearly not wanting to lose their evening's entertainment they nibble at my overture.

"Alright, how about a shot glass full then?" Suggests Big Brother.

"Yeah, but he can't tell mom, and no throwing up either, or he forfeits everything." Middle Brother throws in.

"Right, and no water afterwards, you have to just drink it down, period." Adds Big Brother for final emphasis.

This is it. This is my chance to claim financial freedom. My chance to silence the nightly financial report and walk cleanly from a night of dishes with a potential soaker still at-large. It's my chance to ride off into the sunset with a crisp five-dollar bill in my pocket. I *must* do this. How bad can it possibly be? I've tried the stuff before. In fact, I sprinkled 4 drops of it on a taco once last summer. It's hot, but I don't plan on letting it linger in my mouth for even a moment. Just right down the hatch in one big swallow.

"Alright, fine, I'll do it!"



Their wry grins turn to jubilant smiles as they begin to clear additional space on the counter for the main event.

The funny thing is I've never actually taken a drink from a shot glass before. They look small when I've seen them at a distance, but as Big Brother clinks his choice to the counter it seems a little bigger than I was expecting – at least four of my fingers high and as big around as a tiny fist. An angry fist I might add.

As Big Brother raises the family-sized bottle of Tabasco sauce to the tip of the glass, I dig deep within myself and issue a courageous rallying cry intended to banish the second thoughts that are now gnawing away at my insides. “Alright, c’mon let’s do this. Let’s get it over with.” I say, as I try to convince myself and put on a brave show.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

What is this? My eyes must be deceiving me. The sauce is trickling through a mere pinprick of a hole one painful micro drop at a time! Laughter from two-thirds of the assembled mob rings out, but I'm not amused.

“Can't you unscrew that?” I finally plead. “At this rate we'll be here all night!”

“That's how the bottle is constructed, it's designed for a controlled and metered flow, there's nothing I can do about it,” Big Brother says with a smirk.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

“You could try shaking it up and down. That might make it come out faster.”

Suggests Middle Brother.

The new approach seems to work ever so slightly, but the anguish that builds inside of me grows as I watch liquid evil continue to slowly fill the glass. After what seems an eternity, the drips begin to consolidate into an even plane almost the full four fingers high.

Giddy anticipation has seized brother's one and two now, and as I stand facing them, only a shot glass filled to the rim with blood colored Tabasco separates us. There's no backing down. No self-respecting seven, almost eight year old, ever backs down from his promises where the consumption of vile liquids or disgusting foods are concerned. Not only is it a violation of playground code, if word gets out, it can ruin your credibility around the neighborhood. I got myself into this, and now it's time to settle it, even if in the process I reduce myself to a sideshow carnival act.

I steal one last long glance at Abraham Lincoln's face as he grimaces from the center of his five dollar bill and fold it over in my left hand to clutch it tightly. Seizing the shot glass from the counter with my right hand, I raise it midway to my face and peer intently downward at the murky red fluid.

In the distance, I hear the muffled sound of a broadcast, most likely my father down in the basement, tuning in the AM Band of his trusty radio for a snippet of news, a late breaking sports score, or a burst of Big Band music. An uncomfortable and absolute stillness controls the room with only the expectant breathing of my brothers, and the small quiver of my right hand breaking the spell.

There's no sense nursing this like a cup of hot chocolate, I tell myself. It's like jumping into a cold pool, you do it all at once, or you're only prolonging the agony and making an embarrassing spectacle out of yourself on top of it. Are you a man, or a hot sauce fearing mouse? Now c'mon, let's do this!

It was a moving internal dialogue. Perhaps, one of my best ever, and yet, it was completely ineffectual. My hand remains silently quivering and readjusting itself around the shot glass and the room is turning ugly.

“Hey, we don’t have all night, you know”, chides Middle Brother impatiently.

My back is clearly up against the wall, and there is only one way out – I lift the glass to my lips, tilt my head back, and in one spasmodic motion swallow all of the burning liquid I can muster in one gulp. I have deeply underestimated the number of fluid ounces my throat will accept at one time, and find it necessary to swallow hard twice more to finish the job. As I polish off the final remnants, I slam the now empty glass to the counter defiantly, as though I had just completed a shot of whiskey in the grand tradition of the Old West.

Once again, the faint sounds of my father’s radio can be heard gently pressing against the floorboards below. My brothers, as if depending on important news I have brought from a great distance, wait with baited breath for any change in my demeanor, or for any hint of sound to escape my mouth.

I commence a mental inventory of my condition, bracing for the worst. Several seconds into my task I begin to realize that I no longer discern any lips attached to the front of my face. A wave of sweat pours from my forehead, and my esophagus, clearly in shock from recent events, begins to swell and burn with a white-hot intensity.

“Wow, look at him,” exclaims Middle Brother. “He’s turning completely red!”

I move to speak, to summon any curse word I can find in my arsenal to distract from the pain, but curse words are never allowed in the house. The only practice I get is listening in on the older kids around the neighborhood, and now, right when I need to put what I’ve learned to use most, my mind is going blank.

My face ablaze, my stomach now churning in knots, and my vocabulary completely devoid of any suitable words to express the anguish seizing my internal

organs and tissue, I seek out the next most appropriate action I can think of and clutch my throat with both hands.

My brothers are deeply appreciative of the show, and lean on one another for stability as raucous laughter overtakes their equilibrium. I begin to frantically fan my open mouth in hopes that the cool air may soothe the fire, but to no avail.

“Whoa, his eyes are watering like crazy!” observes Big Brother.

Middle Brother, clearly pleased with the return on his seventeen-dollar investment so far, begins to double over in amusement.

As if my condition were not already apparent, I begin to repeat the word “*hot*” over and over while hyperventilating for good measure.

“*Alright, alright, you can have some water,*” concedes Big Brother.

His sentence is barely complete as I desperately lunge toward the sink and throw the center faucet lever full rudder to the right, hoping to summon the coldest water I can. As a cool surge blasts into the sink I slam Abraham Lincoln to the counter, cup my hands, and furiously scoop every drop of the precious liquid I can gather into my waiting and wide-open mouth.

Inexplicably, the searing heat begins to spread like wildfire. Not only is the water no match for the Tabasco, it seems to have actually made it angry. I begin to utter unintelligibly.

“Hot ... *hot* ... *hot* ... worse ... much worse, *uugh* ... water ... bad.”

This brings down the house as both Big Brother and Middle Brother now struggle to gather oxygen in the midst of their ecstatic laughter. Tears of uncontrollable joy roll

down both of their faces, and as the celebration continues on I grab my five-dollar bounty and stagger from the kitchen toward the stairs.

With my innards now gurgling and lava-like saliva drooling from my mouth, I reach for the brown banister that will guide my way up each of the twelve stairs that lead to the bedroom Middle Brother and I share directly at the top.

Bracing with an unsteady right hand I begin my awkward and slow ascent. I've never noticed the wear pattern in the center of each successive stair as closely as I do now from my wobbly stance, but the daily parade of feet has clearly taken its toll.

The fibers are growing matted and fatigued, and I feel the same now. I make my way to stair number six and rest a spell. In better times, I have sat right here for hours to lounge away an afternoon reading and scribbling pictures in books that belong to my father.

He is very generous with his books, and keeps them neatly catalogued on shelves he built himself throughout the house, but does not appreciate them being amended with crayon. I learned this the hard way when I went through a delusional and very creative spring at the age of five. Convinced that my artistic prowess had matured to a point where I could augment the pages of any book without its rightful owner growing one bit the wiser, I took to liberally enhancing the pages of my father's library. If a military history book indicated the rank of Colonel for a hard working officer who fell short of supreme glory, I would carefully bump his rank to general with the addition of several medals and decorative shoulder markings applied in blue crayon. If a cowboy found himself on the range without the benefit of a mustache to match his fellow riding mates, I would bring him up to speed with a brown crayon applied deftly beneath his nose, and if

a ship found its white sails flying without a fearsome skull and crossbones, I would see to it that they finally gained the respect they deserved with my trusty black crayon.

Short of a small beret and a paint-filled palette attached to one hand, I carried myself for weeks around the house with the air of Van Gogh. All the while quietly looking down my nose at Little Sister's coloring books knowing that I was busier with far more important projects - projects of substance that would forever grace the shelves of our home, and provide the annals of time with a tidy record of my early work.

As it turns out though, art is subjective, and my father proved a stern critic who not only disagreed with me on the technical merit of my work, but on my choice of canvas as well.

Not every artist can open to rave reviews I reminded myself that day, but with stair number seven looming in the foreground my unsettled stomach decides that the time for reminiscing is not now. Now is the time for lying very still in bed and allowing the Tabasco demons to pass, and that is just what I mean to do once I summon the strength to negotiate the final six stairs laid out before me.

With a series of low guttural moans I rise to my full height, breathe deeply the fire within, and make my final move. Like a determined drunken sailor I sway from side-to-side, and yet forward at the same time making progress in spite of myself. I can see the bunk bed Middle Brother and I share beckoning just over the top of the stairs now through our open bedroom door, and the thought of its friendly confines comforts and encourages me onward.

As I reach the upstairs landing, I lean for the doorway, stumble the final four paces toward the bottom bunk, and hurtle myself onto the mattress in a well-practiced

maneuver known well to lower bunk dwellers everywhere. It begins with an abrupt front shoulder-dip to lower the head, and is followed by a full-body counter-clockwise airborne flop safely onto your back.

Lying flat now, I begin to feel my lower lip tingling back to life and returning to my face. My stomach continues to seethe in protest while Abraham Lincoln sits disappointed and crumpled in my left hand now balled into the shape of an anguished fist.

Monosyllabic grunts emanate from my vocal chords as I accentuate each twist and turn of my stomach with varying forms of “*Ughh*”.

“What’s the matter with you?” Comes a voice from the doorway.

It’s mother, now standing perplexed as she peers into the bedroom. She was likely on her way to run an errand downstairs, but instead, she’s stumbled upon her fifth born retching, wheezing and spewing noises from a mattress.

Deeply suspicious now, she asks again, “What’s the matter with you?”

I’ll not get sucked in that easily. A deal is a deal - *no throwing up, and no telling mom*. I’ve come this far and I’m not about to risk everything I’ve earned over a single careless slip of the tongue. Besides, better to writhe in pain and say nothing than to violate one of my father’s most tightly held house rules – nobody likes a tattletale.

Snitching - he can’t abide it. If there is confessing to be done let the guilty party step forward of his own conscience and accord, but not with the help of a meddling sibling.

“What good is a man who would sell his own brother or sister down the river?” he always says. He has a point where the principle of loyalty is concerned, but mother has



no room for the code of the street in her life – she wants answers, and she wants them now.

“Nothing, uugh, just ... under ... the weather,” I manage to say with a grunt as I wrap my arms tighter still around my pillow and roll to one side to avoid any further eye contact.

A completely futile act incidentally, as it takes more than a turned back to persuade her away from the scent of household chicanery. She is not only completely unconvinced, she is now bound and determined to get to the bottom of it all.

In a flash, she disappears down the stairs. I hear the faint drone of confrontation beginning to rise from the kitchen, and then the cadence of mother’s voice quickening ominously. The process of discovery has clearly begun to unfold.

In the grand tradition of Alexander Graham Bell’s “Watson, come here. I need you”, what comes next is mother’s very own contribution for the ages, and it shook the rafters...

**“YOU’RE GOING TO GIVE THE BOY AN ULCER!”**

I cannot suppress the grave sigh that wells up from deep within my lungs. I am on the verge of kite history, and yet, here I lie, ingloriously flat on my back, my stomach full of seething hot sauce, and sweating into my sheets like a malaria victim.

I belong out in the backyard, peering toward the heavens and plotting my course into flight history, not here, wallowing in the oppression of my lower bunk while trying to digest the equivalent of battery acid.

Truth be told, even on the best of nights my time spent in this bottom bunk is a charade. I pretend to lay a peaceful head to sleep each night, but in truth, it’s always with

one eye open and turned toward the undercarriage of the bunk resting precariously above me. My issue is not with the four outer posts that connect our bunks so much, I can see those are securely fastened to one another, but Middle Brother's bed itself is only five wooden cross-slats away from collapsing downward and flattening me into a nocturnal pancake, and they're constantly wiggling loose and in need of adjustment.

If they only knew that while he soars like an eagle over four feet off of the ground each night, I'm left nervously performing pre-sleep safety checks like an airline pit crew just to make sure the mattress and bed frame that hangs above my head will stay in place until morning.

On the one hand it's a nightly ritual born of self-preservation, but there's more to it than that. This bottom bunk is more than just a hazard to my health, it's a symbol of oppression. Let's be honest, it's the low-rent district of the bedding world. Cheap, unwanted real estate where tenants are forced to stare at the underside of the penthouse above for hours on end every night while it mocks their inferior position, or in my case, sometimes worse. Like the time this past New Year's Eve when Middle Brother rained vomit down on me as I slept peacefully below.

How I didn't see the warning signs that that was coming I'll never know. It was all smiles when my parents announced weeks prior that they were having guests over to ring in the New Year. Of course, the trade-off for being allowed to stay up that late was to make ourselves useful by pitching in as miniature party hosts. "My, aren't you two such wonderful little helpers," my parent's friends said as we walked from room to room making sure that drinks were filled, mixed-nuts were in each bowl, and that an assortment of crackers remained on each hors d'oeuvre tray.

Little did they know that as Middle Brother played the role of busboy running each “empty glass” back into the kitchen for refills, he was secretly sampling every single drop of residual champagne, beer, and wine he could find.

I’m not even eight yet, and even I’ve heard the familiar guidepost for consumption - liquor then beer never fear, beer then liquor never sicker. In fairness, the authors of that useful rhyme could never have imagined the combinations Middle Brother threw down that night: Beer then champagne, then wine, then more beer, then champagne, then some mixed nuts, then champagne, then left-over Christmas cookies, then wine, then two crackers with mountains of soft cheese on top, then beer, then more wine, followed by beer, and for good measure, a sip of champagne at midnight actually authorized by my parents equals never sicker. Period.

Had I only known that his freewheeling style and backslapping jokes all night long were not the result of holiday cheer, but rather, a pub’s worth of alcohol taken in one thimble full at a time, I would have regarded him more warily.

I still remember it as if it were yesterday. Me, exhausted and feeling pleased with myself after an evening spent mingling with human beings more than twice my size, settling into bed, pulling my blankets and pillow close, and allowing my eyelids to slowly succumb to the weight of a long and fulfilling day.

Across the room, gently shedding light, were two Christmas candles with soft 9-watt bulbs shining from the windowsill. The scene was so peaceful I hardly noticed Middle Brother awkwardly stumbling up the ladder to the top bunk. I merely assumed that he, like I, was simply exhausted from a long night of festivities.

A content smile crossed my face that night as I finally fell into a deep sleep. It's hard to say how long that lasted. Sometimes the brain will block the details of particularly disturbing experiences for the good of the body itself. My only recollection is the sea of confusion I awoke to as a hail of Middle Brother's sticky and brown stomach contents began to flood down upon me. The flecks of cracker and tell-tale signs of half-digested cheese, and cookies, and nut fragments covered my face and hair. The windowsill Christmas lights now seemed blinding as my eyes tried to squint and make some sense of what was happening. Instinctively, I raised my arms to protect myself from the ambush. I could see his green and retching face and his left arm hanging over the side of the bed above me.

Within moments, mother, whose maternal ear can pick up even the faintest of distress calls, swooped onto the scene turning on every hallway light as she came. Appropriately, she blurted out, "what's going on here!"

Pointing furiously with my right index finger at the sleeping form above, I began to sputter ... "He ... ugh ... UUUGGGHHHHHHH ... I ... was ... He ... UUUGGGHH!"

Try as I might, I was never able to quite find all of the words. I guess she just put two and two together.

Which brings me back to my point. As I lie here with Tabasco sauce gurgling in my stomach, my sheets soaked, and the feeling in my face only now returning, I know it more now than ever - I *need* this kite. It's the antidote, and it alone has the power to liberate my spirit from this low ceiling that presses only several feet from my face each

night. I don't need pick axes or shovels to break free, just an ordinary kite, an extra ball of string, and a chance. A chance to chase my dream.

## Chapter Four

### Friday Night Fights

My stomach, though still squeamish and raw, has finally settled into a truce with my body so I decide to test things out and head my way back downstairs. Only an hour ago this same walk seemed almost insurmountable, but the going is much easier now.

As I make my way, I hear the unmistakable sound of the family room television calling out from around the corner and down the hall. Friday night is in the air, and with it comes freedom unlike any other day of the week. Television is simply never permitted on school nights around here, and even an argument as soundly constructed as, "but my homework is already done" never seems to impress my parents.

"If your homework is done, then go read a book," comes the reply. Occasionally, a weekday sporting event will find a loophole in the system by invoking the time-honored tradition of father-son bonding that allows a ballgame to override schoolbooks, but even then there are strict parameters that must be met.