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DUTTON

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ALSO BY **D**AVE **P**ELZER

A Child Called "It"

The Lost Boy

To the lady who gave her all to make me the man I am today, my lovely bride, my best friend, Mrs. Marsha Pelzer. You make me whole and will forever be my Princess.

To my son, Stephen, I can never tell you how precious you are and how much you have changed my life for the better. Everything I do, I do for you.

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Finally, to the millions of readers who took *A Child Called "It"* and *The Lost Boy* into their hearts am forever grateful. You may not realize, but your actions have made the world a better place.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of the names in this book have been changed in order to protect the dignity and privacy of others.

As with the first two installments of the trilogy, this third part depicts the language and wisdom that was solely developed from my viewpoint as well as that particular time period.

This book is not under any circumstances meant to be used as a reprisal or an opportunity to be vindictive, but rather to serve a purpose of what transpires in my life and the valuable lessons learned.

CHAPTER 1

THE END

MARCH 4, 1973

DALY CITY, CALIFORNIA

I'm scared. My feet are cold and my stomach cries for food. From the darkness of the garage I strain my ears to pick up the slightest sound of Mother's bed creaking as she rolls over in the bedroom upstairs. I can also tell by the range of Mother's hacking cough if she's still asleep or about to get up. I pray Mother doesn't cough herself awake. I pray I still have more time. Just a few more minutes before another day in hell begins. I close my eyes as tightly as I can and mumble a quick prayer, even though I know God hates me.

Because I am not worthy enough to be a member of "The Family," I lie on top of an old, worn-out army cot without a blanket. I curl up into a tight ball to keep as warm as possible. I use the top of my shirt as a tent to cover my head, imagining my exhaled air will somehow keep my face and ears warm. I bury my hands either between my legs or into my armpits. Whenever I feel brave enough, and only after I'm certain that Mother has passed out, I steal a rag from the top of a dirty pile and wrap it tightly around my feet. I'll do anything to stay warm.

To stay warm is to stay alive.

I'm mentally and physically exhausted. It's been months since I've been able to escape through my dreams. As hard as I try, I cannot go back to sleep. I'm too cold. I cannot stop my knees from shaking. I cautiously rub my feet together because I somehow feel if I make any quick movements, "The Mother" will hear me. I am not allowed to do anything without The Mother's direct authority. Even though I know she has returned to sleep in the bottom bunk bed of my brother's bedroom, I sense that she still has control over me.

The Mother always has.

My mind begins to spin as I fight to remember my past. I know that to somehow survive, my answers are in my past. Besides food, heat, and staying alive, learning why Mother treats me the way she does dominates my life.

My first memories of Mother were caution and fear. As a four-year-old child, I knew by the sound of Mother's voice what type of day was in store for me. Whenever Mother was patient and kind, she was my "Mommy." But whenever Mother became crossed and snapped at everything, "Mommy"

transformed into “The Mother”—a cold, evil person capable of unexpected violent attacks. I soon became so scared of setting The Mother off, I didn’t even go to the bathroom without first asking permission.

As a small child, I also realized that the more she drank, the more my mommy slipped away, and the more The Mother’s personality took over. One Sunday afternoon before I was five years old, during one of The Mother’s drunken attacks, she accidentally pulled my arm out of its socket. The moment it happened, Mother’s eyes became as big as silver dollars. Mother knew she had crossed the line. She knew she was out of control. This went far beyond her usual treatment of face slapping, bod punching, or being thrown down the stairs.

But even back then Mother developed a plan to cover her tracks. The next morning, after driving me to the hospital, she cried to the doctor that I had fallen out of my bunk bed during the night. Mother went on to say how she had desperately tried to catch me as I fell, and how she could never forgive herself for reacting so slowly. The doctor didn’t even bat an eye. Back at home, Father, a fireman with medical training, didn’t question Mother’s strange tale.

Afterward, as Mother cuddled me to her chest, I knew to never, ever expose the secret. Even then I somehow thought that things would return to the good times I had with Mommy. I truly believed that she would somehow wake up from her drunken slumber and banish The Mother forever. As a four-year-old child, rocking in Mother’s arms, I thought the worst was over and that Mother would change.

The only thing that had changed was the intensity of Mother’s rage and the privacy of my secret relationship with her. By the time I was eight, my name was no longer allowed to be spoken. She had replaced “David” with “The Boy.” Soon The Boy seemed too personal, so she decided to call me “It.” Because I was no longer a member of “The Family,” I was banished to live and sleep in the garage. When not sitting on top of my hands at the bottom of the staircase, my function was to perform slave-like chores. If I did not meet one of Mother’s time requirements for my task, not only was I beaten, but I was not allowed to receive any food. More than once Mother refused to feed me for over a week. Of all of Mother’s “games” of control, she enjoyed using food as her ultimate weapon.

The more bizarre things The Mother did to me, the more she seemed to know she could get away with any of her Games. When she held my arm over a gas stove, she told horrified teachers that I had played with a match and burned myself. And when Mother stabbed me in the chest, she told my frightened brothers that I had attacked her.

For years I did all that I could do to think ahead, to somehow outwit her. Before Mother hit me, I would tighten up parts of my body. If Mother didn’t feed me, I would steal scraps of food anywhere I could. When she filled my mouth with pink dish washing soap, I’d hold the liquid in my mouth until I could spit it in the garage garbage can when she wasn’t looking. Defeating The Mother in any way meant the world to me. Small victories kept me alive.

My only form of escape had been my dreams. As I sat at the bottom of the staircase with my head tilted backward, I saw myself flying through the air like my hero, Superman. Like Superman, I believed I had two identities. My Clark Kent personality was the child called “It”—an outcast who ate out of garbage cans, was ridiculed, and did not fit in. At times as I lay sprawled out on the kitchen floor unable to crawl away, I *knew* I was Superman. I knew I had an inner strength, a secret identity that no one else realized. I came to believe if Mother shot me, the bullets would bounce off my chest.

No matter what “Game” Mother invented, no matter how badly she attacked me, I was going to win; was going to live. ~~At times when I couldn’t block out the pain or the loneliness, all I had to do was close my eyes and fly away.~~

Just weeks after my twelfth birthday, Mother and Father separated. Superman disappeared. All my inner strength shriveled up. That day I knew Mother was going to kill me—if not that Saturday, then someday soon. With Father out of the way, nothing could stop The Mother. Even though for years Father had at times watched in dismay while he sipped his evening drink when Mother had me swallow tablespoons of ammonia or shrug his shoulders while she’d beat me senseless, I had always felt safer whenever he was in the house. But after Mother dropped off Father’s meager belongings and drove away, I clasped my hands together as tightly as I could and whispered, “. . . and may He deliver me from evil. Amen.”

That was almost two months ago, and God never answered my prayers. Now, as I continue to shiver in the darkness of the garage, I know the end is near. I cry for not having the courage or the strength to fight back. I’m too tired. The eight years of constant torture have sucked my life force out of me. I clasp my hands together and pray that when The Mother kills me, she will have mercy to kill me quickly.

I begin to feel light-headed. The harder I pray, the more I feel myself drift off to sleep. My knees stop quivering. My fingers loosen from digging into my bony knuckles. Before I pass out, I say to myself, “God . . . if you can hear me, can you somehow take me away? Please take me. Take me today.”

My upper body snaps upright. I can hear the floorboards strain upstairs from Mother’s weight. Her gagging cough follows a moment later. I can almost visualize her bent over as she nearly coughs up her lungs from the years of heavy smoking and her destructive lifestyle. *God, how I hate her cough.*

The darkness of my sleep quickly fades away. A chill fills my body. I so badly want to remain asleep, forever. The more I wake from my slumber, the more I curse God for not taking me in my sleep. He never answers my prayers. I so badly wish I were dead. I don’t have the energy to live another day in “The House.” I can’t imagine another day with The Mother and her sinister games. I break down and cry. A waterfall of tears runs down my face. I used to be so strong. I just can’t take it anymore.

Mother’s stumbling brings me back to my dismal reality. I wipe my runny nose and my tears away. I must never, *ever* expose a sign of weakness. I take a deep breath and gaze upward. I lock my hands together before retreating inside my shell that will protect me for another day. *Why?* I sigh. *If you are God, what is your reason? I just . . . I so badly want to know, Why? Why am I still alive?*

Mother staggers out of her bedroom. *Move!* my brain screams. *Move it!* I only have a few seconds before . . . I was supposed to be up an hour ago to begin my chores.

I stand up and fumble through the darkness, trying to find the light switch to the garage. I trip over one of the legs to the army cot. By reflex, I reach out to the floor to soften the impact, but I’m too

slow. A moment later the side of my face smashes against the cold cement. Bright silver dots fill my view. ~~I smack the palms of my hands on the floor. I so badly want to pass out. I never want to regain consciousness ever again.~~

I push myself up off the cement as I hear Mother's footsteps leading to the bathroom. After flicking on the light switch, I snatch the broom before racing up the staircase. If I can finish sweeping the stairs before Mother catches me, she will never know I'm behind. *I can win.* I smile as I tell myself, *Come on, man, go! Move it!* I seem so out of breath. My mind races at supersonic speed, but my body responds in slow motion. My feet feel like blocks of cement. The tips of my fingers are so cold. I don't understand why I'm so slow. I used to be lightning fast.

Without thinking I reach my left hand out to the wooden rail that I use to pull myself up the stairs. *I'm going to win,* I say to myself, *I'm actually going to make it!* I can hear the gurgling sound of the toilet flushing from above. I quicken my pace. I extend my arm toward the rail. I smile inside. *I'm going to beat her.* A split second later my heart skips a beat as my hand misses the rail and grabs air. My body begins to wobble. *The rail! Grab the stupid rail!* As hard as I fight to concentrate, my fingers refuse to obey.

My world turns black.

A blinding glare pierces my eyes. My head seems as if it is stuck in a fog. I can make out a figure standing above me in front of a bright white light. ". . . aht ime is it?"

I try to shake my head clear. For a moment I thought I was staring at an angel sent to take me to heaven.

But Mother's sickening cough soon erases my fantasy. "I said, 'What time is it?' " The sound of her voice nearly makes me pee my pants. Mother uses a soft, evil tone so not to wake up her precious babies. "Let's see how fast . . . you can move that sorry little behind of yours up here . . . now!" Mother demands with a snap of her fingers. My body shudders as I place the broom against the base of the stairs.

"Oh, no!" Mother beams. "Bring your friend with you." I'm not sure what she means. I spin around then look back up at Mother. "The broom, you moron. Bring it with you."

With every step I take, my mind begins to plot a defense for whatever Game Mother has in store for the crime of not completing my chore on time. I warn myself to stay focused. I know she plans on using the broom as a weapon, either against my chest or face. Sometimes when we're alone, Mother likes to smash the end of the broom directly behind my knees. If she has me follow her into the kitchen, I'm dead. I won't be able to walk to school, let alone run. But if Mother keeps me on the stairs, I know she'll only hit me in my upper body.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, I automatically assume "the position of address": my body stands perfectly straight, with my head bent down and my hands glued to my sides. I am not allowed to move a muscle, blink, look at her or even breathe without Mother's direct permission.

“Tell me, tell me *I’m stupid*,” Mother whispers as she leans over. I cringe as I imagine her taking a bite from my ear. ~~It’s part of the Game. She’s testing me to see if I’ll flinch. I dare not look up or back away.~~ My heels hang over the edge of the stair. I pray Mother doesn’t push me . . . today.

“Go ahead, tell me. Please,” Mother begs. The tone of her voice changes. Mother’s voice seems calm, nonthreatening. My mind spins. I don’t understand. Did Mother just give me permission to speak? I have no idea what she expects of me. Either way, I’m trapped. I focus my energy on the front of my shoes. The more I stare, the more my body begins to sway.

Without warning Mother thrusts a finger under my chin, lifting my face to hers. Her rancid breath makes my stomach coil. I fight not to pass out from her stench. Even though she does not allow me to wear my glasses at home, I glance at Mother’s puffy, reddened face. Her once gleaming hair is now oily and matted against the sides of her face. “Just how stupid do you think I am? Tell me, exactly: How stupid am I?” I sheepishly look up and reply, “Ma’am?”

A raging fire stings the side of my face. “Just who in the hell gave you permission to speak, let alone look!” Mother hisses.

I snap my head back down as I quickly bury the pain inside. *My God*, I say to myself, *I didn’t see it coming. What’s happening to me?* I’m always able to see her arm swing back before she strikes me. I cannot figure out why I am so slow. *Dammit, David, stay focused! Think!*

“When is *It* going to begin *Its* chores?” Mother bellows. “What is it with you? I bet you think I’m stupid! You think you can get away with whatever you damn well please! Don’t you?” Mother shakes her head. “I’m not the one hurting you. You are. You choose your actions. You know who—what—you are and what your purpose is in this household.

“If *It* wants to be fed, then it’s simple: *It* does exactly as *It*’s told. If *It* doesn’t want to be punished then *It* stays out of trouble. *It* knows the rules. I don’t treat you any different from anybody else. *It* simply refuses to obey.” Mother stops to take a deep breath. Her chest begins to wheeze. It’s time for her fix. I know what’s coming next. I wish she’d go ahead and hit me. “And what about me?” Her voice rises. “I should be asleep, but no, I have to be here with *It*. You pathetic piece of filth! You little bastard! You know your function. You’re not a *person*, but . . . a *thing* to do with as *I* please. Do you understand? Am I making myself clear, or perhaps *It* needs another lesson?” Mother thunders.

Mother’s words echo inside my soul. For years I’ve heard the same thing over and over again. For years I’ve been her human robot to do with as she pleases, like some toy that she can turn on and off whenever she wishes.

I break down inside. My body begins to shake. I can’t take it anymore. *Go ahead*, I say to myself. *Do it! Just kill me! Come on!* Suddenly, my vision sharpens. My insides stop shaking. Rage slowly begins to fill me. I no longer feel ice cold. I shift my head from side to side as my eyes creep up Mother’s robed body. The fingers to my right hand tighten around the wooden broomhandle. As I slowly let out a deep breath, my eyes stare directly into Mother’s. “*Leave me alone . . . you bitch!*” I hiss.

Mother becomes paralyzed. I focus every fiber of my being on piercing through her silver-framed glasses and reddened eyes. I will myself to somehow transfer every moment I had to carry for the last

eight years of pain and loneliness into Mother.

Mother's face turns ash white. She knows. Mother knows exactly what I'm feeling. *It's working*, I tell myself. Mother tries to break away from my stare. She moves her head slightly to the left. I match Mother's movement. She can't escape. Mother looks down and away. I tilt my head up and sharpen my stare. I smile. From the bottom of my soul I feel so warm. Now *I'm* the one in control.

From the back of my mind I hear a chuckle. For a moment I think it's me laughing at Mother. I lower my eyes and see Mother's crocodile smile. Her putrid breath breaks my concentration. The more Mother smiles, the more my body becomes tense. She tilts her head toward the light. *Now*, I tell myself, *now I can see it coming. Go ahead, give it to me! Come on, do it! Show me what you got!* I see the blur a split second before I feel her hand collide against my face. A moment later, warm blood seeps from my nose. I let it drip on the black-matted stairs. I refuse to give Mother the pleasure of watching me cry or reacting in any way whatsoever. I defy her by remaining numb inside and out.

"Showing a little guts, are you? Well, you're a few years too late!" Mother sneers. "You don't have what it takes. You never have and you never will. You're such a pathetic little worm. I can kill you anytime I please. Just like *that*," Mother says with a snap of her fingers. "You are only alive because it pleases me. You are nothing more than . . ."

I block out Mother's words as a cold fear creeps back inside my soul. I bow my head, resuming the position of address. Dark red blood spatters the toes of my shoes. *For a fleeting moment I felt so alive*

She's in control now.

The more that Mother babbles, the more I nod my head, acknowledging Mother is indeed almighty and God-like for allowing me to live another day in her household. "You don't know how lucky you are. When I was your age, you wouldn't believe what *I* was put through. . . ."

I let out a deep sigh and close my eyes in a vain attempt to block out the sound of her voice. How I wish she would pass out and drop dead. In my mind I fantasize Mother sprawled on the hallway floor. I would give anything to be there as she quivered helplessly on her back before taking her last breath.

Mother's voice changes in pitch. Suddenly my throat feels as if it is on fire as Mother tightens her grip around my neck. My eyes want to pop out of my head. I did not focus on Mother's attack before it came. By reflex I wrap my hands around Mother's fingers. As much as I try, I cannot pry her hands off. The more I struggle, the more Mother tightens her death grip. I try to scream, but only a gurgling sound leaks out. My head slumps forward. As my eyes roll backward, I concentrate on Mother's face. *Do it!* I shout to myself. *Come on, do it! You're so bad, you're so tough, come on! Show me, show me what you got! Kill me, you bitch!*

Mother's cheeks twitch from her intense hatred. Her nostrils flare from her rapid breathing. I want Mother to kill me. I begin to feel myself drift away. My hearing seems as if I am in the middle of a long tunnel. My arms fall to my side. For the first time in years, my body relaxes. I'm no longer cold inside. I'm no longer frightened. I'm ready to . . .

A hard slap makes my head shake from side to side. "Oh no, wake up! Wake up, you miserable piece of trash! I'm not through with you yet! I know exactly what you want!" Mother hisses. "So, you

think you're so smart? How about . . . instead of sending you to your Uncle Dan's this weekend, maybe I should have the boys go instead, so you and I can spend some *private time* together? Bet you didn't think of that one, did you?"

I know by the sound of her voice that I am supposed to respond, but I can't.

"Oh, what's the matter? Does the little insect have a sore throat? Oh well, that's just too bad!" Mother smiles. I can see her lips moving, but I can barely make out what she's saying. After another quick squeeze, Mother lets go of her hold. Without permission, I rub my neck, gasping for air. Somehow I know she's not done with me—not yet. A second later I nearly lose my balance as Mother snatches the broom from beside me. I automatically tighten my upper body. "This," she says, "this is for cheating on your chores. I've told you a hundred times that you are to get that miserable butt of yours up and working before I get up. *Do I make myself perfectly clear?*"

I hesitate, not knowing how or if I should respond.

"I said, *is that clear?*"

"Yes . . . ah, yes, ma'am," I stutter in a hoarse voice.

"Tell me, what is your name?" Mother asks as she tilts her head upward in a show of supremacy.

" 'It,' " I answer in a sheepish tone.

"And what is '*Its*' function?"

"Ta . . . ta . . . ta do . . . do as you command and stay outta . . . outta trouble."

"And when I say, 'Jump'?"

"I ask, 'How high?' " I reply without thought.

"Not bad. Not bad at all!" Mother leers. "But I do think It requires another lesson. Perhaps this will teach you . . . teach It. . . ."

I can hear a swishing sound. I brace my arms for the impact. My upper body is rock solid, but I have no way of telling which direction the sound is coming from. A jolting thud strikes the side of my neck. My knees buckle as I turn inside the doorway and lean against Mother's body. Without thinking I reach out to Mother. Her eyes shine with pleasure. She slaps my hands away. As my feet slip, my head jerks backward. I can feel my throat collapse the same way it did when Mother had me swallow teaspoons full of ammonia. I fight to swallow a breath of air, but my brain is too slow to respond. My eyes lock on to Mother's. "So, do you still think you can fly?"

I glance down and see Mother's hand in motion. A moment later I can feel myself floating, my arms flung above my face. Suddenly, a rush of air fills my chest as the back of my head smashes against the staircase. I reach out, but I can't stop my body from bouncing backward down the stairs. At the bottom of the staircase, my chest heaves; I want to find a bucket and throw up. At the door above me, Mother bends over with laughter. "Look at you! You're a hoot!"

Her face becomes taut. In an ice-cold voice Mother says, “You’re not even worth the effort.” With a jerk of her hand she flings the broom at me, then slams the door shut. My only form of protection is to close my eyes. I don’t even bother to turn away or cover my face. I can hear the broom topple down the stairs before missing me completely.

Alone in the garage I let go and cry like a baby. I don’t care if Mother, or anyone else in the world, can hear me. I have no dignity, no self-worth. Rage slowly builds inside my soul. I clench my hands together and begin taking my frustration out on the floor. *Why, why, why? What in the hell did I ever do to you to make you hate me so much?*

With every blow I can feel my strength drain away. The whitish-yellow garage light begins to fade as I lose consciousness. Without thinking of Mother catching me, I lie on my side, pull my shirt over my face, bury my hands between my legs, and close my eyes. Before I pass out, I clasp my hands together and mutter, “Take me.”

“Wake up! Wake up, I tell you!” My eyes flicker open. I’m trapped in a mental haze as I stand in front of Mother in the kitchen. I have no idea how I got here. And somehow I know it’s almost time for me to run to school. My mind struggles to recall why I keep losing track of time.

“I said, wake up!” Mother barks. She leans over and slaps my face. I’m fascinated that I can no longer feel the pain. “What in the hell is wrong with you?” she asks with some concern.

Forgetting who I am, I rub my face and reply, “I dunno.” Immediately I know I’ve just committed double crime of *moving* and *speaking* without Mother’s permission. Before I can stop myself, I commit *another* offense by looking right at her and shaking my head. “I don’t understand . . . what’s happening to me?”

“You’re fine,” Mother states. I lean forward to catch what she said. I’m not sure, but I think Mother just spoke to me in a soft tone. “Listen. Listen up. Tell ’em . . . uhm, tell them that you were . . .” I strain to pay attention to Mother’s instructions, but her words seem mumbled and confusing. Mother snaps her fingers, indicating a breakthrough for her latest cover story. “If those nosy teachers ask, you tell them that you were wrestling and you got out of control . . . so your brothers had to put you in your place. Do you understand?”

I’m trying to digest Mother’s new set of instructions.

“Do you understand?” Mother probes, fighting to keep her anger under control.

“Ah, yes,” I chuckle. I cannot believe how easily Mother can come up with her off-the-wall lies every single day of school. I’m also amazed that I no longer care about masking my emotions in front of her. “Tell ’em I was wrong. I was bad.”

“And . . . ?” Mother whines, trying to draw me out further.

“Tell them . . . I was . . . I was playing, I mean wrestling! I was wrestling and . . . I got out of control. Yes, I understand,” I stammer.

Mother tilts her head to one side as she inspects her latest damage. She holds her gaze for a few moments before losing her balance, stumbling toward me. In a jerking motion I flinch backward. “Shh . . . no, it’s okay. Relax,” Mother calmly says with an outstretched hand as she keeps her distance, acting as if I were a stray dog. “No one’s going to hurt you. Shh . . .” Mother circles around me before backing into her kitchen chair. Bending her head down, she stares into space.

My head begins to slump forward when Mother’s hacking cough makes me snap upright. “It wasn’t always like this, you know,” she whimpers in a scratchy voice. “If you knew . . . if you only understood. I wish I could somehow make you, make *them* understand. . . .” Mother stops in mid-sentence to collect herself. I can feel her eyes scan my body. “Things just got outta control, that’s all never meant to . . . to live like this. No one does. I tried, God knows I did—to be the good wife, the perfect mother. I did everything: den mother this, PTA that, hosting the perfect parties. I really did tr

“You, you’re the only one who knows, who really knows. You’re the only one I can really talk to,” Mother whispers. “I can’t trust *them*. But you, you’re the perfect outlet, the perfect audience, anytime it damn well pleases *me*. You don’t talk, so no one will hear your pain. You don’t have any friends, and you never go outside, so you know what it’s like to be all alone inside. Hell, besides school, no one knows you. It’s as if you were never . . .

“No. You’ll never tell anyone . . . never!” Mother brags as she nods her head up and down to reinforce her warning.

Without stealing a glance, I can hear Mother sniffle as she struggles not to let down her guard. I realize she’s only using me to talk to herself. She always has. When I was younger, Mother would drag me out of bed in the middle of the night, have me stand in front of her as she poured herself glass after glass and raved on for hours. But now as I stand in front of her, I’m too numb to understand her ramblings. *What in the hell does she want?* Can she be totally smashed so early in the morning, or is she still under the effects from last night’s stupor? Maybe she’s testing my reaction? I hate not knowing what Mother expects of me.

“You,” she continues, “oh, you were so cute! At parties everyone loved *you!* Everyone wanted to take you home. Always polite, always with manners. Wouldn’t speak unless spoken to. Oh, I remember whenever you couldn’t sleep, you’d crawl up into my lap and sing me Christmas songs, even in the middle of July. Whenever I felt bad I could always count on you to ‘croon a tune.’ ” Mother smiles as she remembers the past. She can no longer control the tears that stream down her cheeks. I’ve never seen her like this before. “You had the sweetest voice, David. Why is it you don’t sing for me anymore? How come?” Mother stares at me as if I were a ghost.

“I don’t . . . I dunno.” My grogginess vanishes. I realize this is not one of Mother’s sinister Games I know, deep inside Mother, that something is different. She’s reaching out. Mother’s never been this emotional about her past. I wish I had a clear head to analyze what she’s trying to tell me. I know it’s not the booze talking, but my real mother, the one who’s been trapped inside herself for so many years. “Mommy?”

Mother’s head jerks up as she covers her mouth. “*Mommy?* Oh Lord, David, do you know how long it’s been since I’ve been someone’s *Mommy?* My God!” She closes her eyes to hide her pain. “You were so fragile, so timid. You don’t remember, but you were always the slow one. It took you forever to tie your shoes. I thought I’d go crazy trying to teach you that damn square knot for your Cub Scout

badge. But you never gave up. I'd find you in a corner of the room trying to tie knots. No, that's one thing about you, you never gave up. Hey," Mother asks with a wide smile, "do you remember that summer when you were seven or eight years old, and you and I spent forever trying to catch that fish at Memorial Park?"

With perfect clarity I recall how Mommy and I sat at the far edge of a giant fallen log that hung over a small stream. I couldn't believe she had chosen me—over my younger brother Stan, who constantly fought for Mother's attention. As Stan threw a temper tantrum on the beach below us, I thought Mother would realize her mistake. But Mommy had paid no attention to Stan's commotion; she simply tightened her grip on my belt, in case I slipped, and whispered encouragement into my ear. After a few minutes of fishing, I deliberately kept the pink salmon egg bait just above the water. I never wanted my adventure with my mommy to end. Now, as I shake my head clear of the memory, my voice becomes choked up. "I, ah, I prayed we'd never catch that fish," I confessed to her.

"Why's that?"

"So . . . we could spend more time together . . . as mother and son."

"Oh, your brother Stan was red with jealousy, stomping up and down beside the creek, throwing rocks into the water, trying to scare off that fish of yours. My God." Mother tosses her hair back, revealing a rare smile.

I'm not sure if she failed to hear or understand the true meaning of what I said.

"David?" Mother pleads. "You do remember, don't you?"

"Yes," I cry, shaking my head, "I do. I remember everything. Like the first day of school when the teacher had us color a picture of what we did that summer. I drew you and me sitting on that old tree with a happy-face sun shining above us. Remember, I gave it to you that day after school?"

Mother turns away from me. She clutches her coffee mug, then puts a finger to her lips. The excitement from her face drains away. "No!" Mother states in a strict tone, as if our fishing adventure were a hoax.

"Oh, sure you do—"

"I said no, goddammit!" Mother interrupts. She clamps her eyes shut and covers her ears. "No, no, no! I don't remember. You can't make me! No one can force me to remember the past if I don't want to. Not you or anybody else. No one tells *me* what to do! You got that, mister?"

"Yes, ma'am," I automatically respond.

Mother's face turns beet red as the muscles in her neck tighten. Her upper body begins to shake. I'm not sure, but I think Mother is having a violent seizure. I want to yell out, but I'm too scared. I stand in front of Mother like a helpless fool. I don't know what to do.

After a few seconds the redness from her face disappears. She lets out a deep sigh. "I just don't know anymore . . . if I'm coming or going. I don't know . . . I didn't mean for things to happen this way; no one did. You can't blame me, I did my best . . ."

The sweetness in her voice fades. I want so badly to run and hug *Mommy* before she completely slips away, but, like always, I know in a few hours *Mother* won't remember a single word of our conversation. I back away from the kitchen table and resume the position of address.

"Oh, Jesus!" Mother snaps. "Now look what you've done! I've got to drive my boys to school! Forget the dishes; you can finish them after school. And listen up: I don't want to hear a peep from any of those nosy teachers today, so you keep that carcass of yours the hell out of trouble! You got mister?" Mother raises her voice to her usual evil tone.

"Yes, ma'am," I mutter.

"Then get the hell out of my house! Run!" Mother bellows.

"What about lunch . . . ?" I ask.

"Too bad. You took my time, then I take your lousy sandwich. You'll just have to go diggin' for food today. Now get the hell out of here! Don't make me get the broom! Now run!"

In a flash I race through Mother's house. I can hear her evil laugh as I slam the front door shut before sprinting off to school.

Minutes later, after running to school at top speed, I stagger into the nurse's office with my hands slapping on my knees. With every breath I take in, the muscles around my throat tighten. An enormous pressure from behind my eyes begins to build. I slap my knees as if that will somehow make air rush into my lungs. The school nurse spins around from behind her desk. My mind fumbles to yell, but I cannot form the words. But I try again. "*C-a-n-'t b-r-e-a-t-h-e!*" I finally sputter, pointing at my neck.

The nurse leaps up with lightning speed, grabs a brown bag, turns it upside down spilling its contents onto the floor, and kneels down in front of me. Through my tears I can see the terror in her eyes. I want to cry out, but I'm too scared. The nurse pulls on my hand, but I slap her away as I continue to pound my knees. The more I try to draw air into my lungs, the more the invisible bands tighten around my chest. "No!" the nurse shouts. "David, stop it! Don't fight it! You're hyperventilating!"

"Hipper ventle . . . ?" I gasp.

"Slow down. You're going to be fine. I'm just going to put this bag over your—"

"*Nooo!* I can't . . . won't be able . . . to see. I . . . have to see!"

"Shh, I'm right here. Close your eyes and concentrate on the sound of my voice. Good. Now slow down. Take tiny puffs of air. Breathe through your nose. That's it," the nurse whispers in a soothing voice. With her I feel safe. "That's much better; tiny breaths. Reach out, take my hand. I'm right here. I'm not going to leave you. You're going to be fine."

I obey the nurse and shut my eyes. As the nurse places the bag over my face, I can instantly feel warm air circulate. ~~It feels good, but after a few breaths my exhaled air becomes too hot. My legs begin to lock up. By accident I jerk the nurse's hand.~~

“Shh. David, trust me, you're fine. You're doing better. Much better. That's it, slow down. See? Now, lean your head back and relax.”

As I tilt my head backward, a rush of air escapes from my mouth. The pressure is so intense that I fight to keep myself from throwing up. I rip the bag from my face before my legs buckle, and I fall to the floor gasping for more air. Within seconds the bands around my chest begin to ease.

After a few minutes, the fire from inside my neck begins to cool. “Here,” the nurse says, holding a glass of ice cubes in front of me, “take one of these to suck on.”

I try to pick up a piece of ice, but my trembling fingers cannot grasp the cube. Without a second thought the nurse reaches into the glass and picks one out. “Open up.”

I lower my head, trying to hide. The moment I do, the searing pain returns. “David, what's wrong? Come on now, open up,” she instructs in a more commanding tone. I close my eyes. I know what's coming next: questions. *I'd give anything to avoid another round of questions.* All they do is make everyone at school upset and somehow Mother always finds out. Whenever the principal has called Mother, the staff at school would see the results the next day. As I continue to avoid the nurse's eyes I fantasize about crawling into a corner so I can disappear.

I slowly open my eyes when I feel the nurse lift my head with her fingers. Her face turns chalky white.

“Oh . . . my . . . Lord! What in heaven's name happened to your neck?” the nurse exclaims as she peers from side to side.

I wring my hands, hoping she'll drop the subject. “*Please!*” I wheeze. “*Let it go.*”

“The side of your Adam's apple is so swollen!” The nurse flies away to snatch a tongue depressor from one of her glass jars. “Let's have a look. Open up.” I let out a raspy sigh before obeying. “I need you to open just a little bit wider. Can you do that for me?” she asks gently.

“Can't,” I whimper. “Hurts too much.”

At last the nurse allows me to close my mouth. Again, I try to avoid her stare. I bury my trembling fingers in my lap. She shakes her head before standing up and grabbing her clipboard. Every school day, for over a year, the nurse has inspected my body from head to toe before documenting her examinations. Now she mutters to herself as she scribbles her latest findings. Kneeling back down, she delicately massages the palms of my hands. I bite my lip in anticipation. The nurse stares into my eyes as if not knowing what to say. Now I'm really scared.

“I'm sorry, David,” she says as tears seep from behind her glasses. “I was wrong. You weren't hyperventilating. Your, ah, your larynx . . . your epiglottis is swollen and your trachea is inflamed. What I'm saying is: this is why you are having trouble breathing. The opening to your throat was

cutting off your flow of oxygen. Do you understand?"

I take a moment to visualize in my mind the nurse's meaning. I don't want her to think I'm stupid.

"When did this happen?" she asks.

I look away from the nurse's gaze and stare at my shoes. "I was, uhm . . ." I fumble for the exact wording to Mother's cover story, but my brain still feels trapped in a fog bank. "I was . . . I fell . . . I fell down the stairs."

"David?" she replies, raising her eyebrows.

"It's my fault!" I snap back. "I was wrestling and I got out of control and my brothers—"

"Poppycock!" the nurse interrupts. "You mean your mother knew of your condition . . . and she still made you run to school? Do you realize what might have happened to you? For goodness sakes, you could have . . ."

"Uhm, no, ma'am. Please, I'm better now. Really, I'm fine," I say as softly and as quickly as I can before the burning sensation returns. "Please! It's not her fault! Let it go!"

The nurse lifts her glasses to wipe away her tears. "No! Not this time! I won't let it go. I've had enough. This is the last straw. This has to be reported to the principal. Something has got to be done." She stands up and slaps her clipboard against her leg as she marches for the door.

"No! Pleeze!" I beg. "You don't understand! If you tell, she'll—"

"She'll what?" The nurse spins around. "Tell me, David, tell me so I have something, anything, to go on! I know it's her—we know it's her—but you've got to help us, to help you," she pleads.

In an effort to relieve the pain I stare up at the ceiling. I wring my hands and concentrate on inhaling tiny puffs of air through my nose. From the corner of my eye I can see the nurse still standing by the door. I slowly turn my head toward her. Tears run down my cheeks. "I, ah . . . I can't."

"Why? In heaven's name, why do you protect her? What are you waiting for?" she barks in a rattling voice. "Something has to be done!"

The nurse's words pound through my skull. I bite down on my lip until it bleeds. My arms begin to shake. "Dammit!" I blurt out in a squeaky voice. "*Don't you understand? There's nothing, nothing, that anyone can do! It's my fault! It's always my fault.* 'Boy' this, 'It' that, blah, blah, blah. Every day is a repeat of the day before. Even you," I state with my finger thrust at the nurse, "every day I come in, take off my clothes, you look me over, you ask me about this, about that . . . for what? Nothing changes, and nothing ever will!" The band around my throat begins to tighten, but I don't care. I can no longer control my flood of emotions. "Miss Moss tried—"

"Miss Moss?" the nurse asks.

"My, ah, my second-grade teacher. She tried . . . she tried to help and she's gone. . . ."

“David?” the nurse says in a disbelieving tone.

I bury my face in my hands. “Father tried . . . and he’s gone, too. You have to understand: everything I am, everything I do, is bad. Everything’s wrong. If you get too close, she’ll . . . she’ll die with you, too! No one wins!” I cry. “No one wins against The Mother!” I bend over in a coughing fit. Whatever energy I had drains away. I lean against the nurse’s examination bed. I fight to slow down my breathing. “I, ah . . . when I sat at the bottom of the garage stairs and they’d watch TV or eat dinner, I tried to figure things out, to understand why.” I shake my head clear of the countless hours spent in the garage. “You know the one thing I wanted the most?”

Her mouth hangs open. She’s never seen me like this before. “No,” she answers.

“I just wanted to be *real*. To be a real kid—with clothes and stuff. I don’t mean just toys, but to be outside. I always wanted to play on the jungle gym after school. I’d really like to do that.” For a moment I smile at my fantasy. “But I know I won’t be able to. *Never*. I have to run to The House fast or I get into trouble. Sometimes, on really sunny days, as I’m running from school, I cheat and stop to watch the kids play.”

My vision becomes blurred as I rattle off my deepest secrets to the nurse. Because I am not allowed to speak at Mother’s house and have no friends at school, I have no one to express my feelings to. “Other times in the garage, at night, when I lay on my cot, I’d think hard to figure out what I could do. I mean, to fix things between Mother and me, to make things better. I wanted to know why, how, things became so bad. I really thought if I tried hard enough—if I prayed with all my spirit—I’d find my answers. They never came.

“I . . . I, ah, tri—tried,” I stutter. I’m holding back my tears. “I spent so much time . . . I, ah, I just . . . I just wanted to know why. That’s all. Why me, why us? I just wanted to know. Why?” I stare into the nurse’s eyes. “I don’t care anymore! I just want to go to sleep! I’m tired of everything! The games, the secrets, the lies, hoping one day Mother will wake up and everything will be better again! I can’t take it anymore!

“If you could just let me sleep, for just a while, please?” I beg.

She shakes her head. “This has to end, David. Look at you. You’re—”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt in a calm voice. “I’m not . . . when I’m at school, I’m not afraid. Just promise me you won’t tell. *Not today, please?*”

“David, you know I can’t do that,” the nurse replies in a flat tone.

“If you . . . if you tell,” I pant, “then you know what will happen. Please, let it go!”

She nods her head in agreement. “Just for today.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She takes my hand and leads me to the small bed in the corner of the room.

“Cross your heart and hope to die?” I ask, making an X mark on my chest with my finger.

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