

"Run away, and the old goat will have to be content with me. It will be easier for me. You can't do this."

Tahmina looked down the long dirt road that disappeared into the Afghan dust. She looked at her little brother; then she stood up and staggered to the corner of the building where she was violently sick to her stomach.

The walk back home was long and slow. Papa held tightly to her hand and cried with every step.

Tahmina didn't cry. She thought about the poppies, broken and in the ground. She thought about the journeys she had taken with her family. She thought about her mother, strong and smart, and her father and brothers—all of them brave.

Across the plains, in the hills, explosions rumbled. Dirt shot high up into the air. It swirled around and settled on the fields and the people.

And the fine, soft powder settled over all the pretty flowers.

The Dark Side of Nixon

Brandon opened her purse. She never gave him enough. She counted out every nickel. "This is what your milk will cost," and she put it into a little envelope marked *Milk*. "This is what your lunch will cost," and she put it into a little envelope marked *Lunch*. Usually she made his lunch, but now that he was in high school, she sometimes let him buy it. But she always seemed to know how much a school lunch would cost, and there was never anything extra.

He needed money for other things, but she would never believe him.

"You don't have to pay to use the school bathroom," she'd said, as if she knew, as if she went to school every day. "You've got to learn to stand up for yourself."

Stand up for yourself but don't fight. Speak up for yourself but don't shout. You can do it, but there's no shame in failure.

All his life, nothing making sense. Nothing working properly.

Stupid, all his life.

He was smart about finding his mother's purse, though. She kept hiding it, and he kept finding it. She'd yell that she was going to call the police on him, but she never did.

This time, her purse was right out on her bed, asking him to open it. He couldn't see any bills, but he grabbed whatever coins he could hold in his hand.

This time, he found something else. A small plastic chip that read "Five years."

He went down to the kitchen. Mom was finishing the supper dishes.

"Mom, what's this? I found it in your purse."

His mom turned around, dripping soap suds. "In my purse? How many times have I told you?"

"It says *five years*." He held the little disk up to her. "What is it?"

Mom turned back around. "They give those out at AA. It means I haven't had a drink in five years."

Brandon didn't understand. "A drink?"

Mom left the casserole dish in the sink to soak away

the remains of the scalloped potatoes. "You remember when I used to drink—beer and wine and gin. You remember."

Brandon never paid much attention to what his mother did.

"I guess it's time we talked about this. I stopped drinking over five years ago, and Alcoholics Anonymous gave me that little disk to remind me of my achievement." She dried her hands on a dish towel, sat down at the kitchen table, and pulled a chair out for Brandon to sit with her. "I'd still be drinking if it weren't for you."

"I did something good?"

"Do you remember back in grade five, before your dad left, how we took you to all those doctors?"

"Uh huh." He didn't, really. But if he was in the middle of doing something good, he didn't want to argue.

"We couldn't figure out what was wrong with you. All those tantrums. All those problems in school. You seemed smart, but you could barely add two and two."

Brandon knew he was no good at arithmetic. He didn't need to be reminded of that.

"Wipe that scowl off your face. I'm not going to nag you. The doctors told us you have FAS."

Brandon sounded it out. "F-A-S. Fas?"

"Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. I was drinking a lot when I was pregnant with you; because of that, you have this condition. After they told me, I decided to stop drinking. I went to my first AA meeting that evening, and I haven't had a drop of alcohol since."

Brandon couldn't grasp it. "My problems are your fault?"

"It's not like I set out to make your life difficult. I just didn't know any better. I was just a kid myself when I had you, not much older than you are now. I wasn't a very bright kid, either."

She kept on talking, but Brandon had stopped listening. He was hearing other things in his head—teachers yelling at him for fidgeting in his chair, classmates calling him "retard" and "stupid," kids laughing as they grabbed at his homework full of blotches and mistakes.

And then he heard her say, "I learned that you need structure and clear instructions, and that you are quite capable of doing many things. A lot of people have it much worse. I hope you're not going to start using this as an excuse."

"It's because of *you* that I'm like this?" That's when Brandon knew he had to go or he'd have to start throwing things.

"It's because of me that you're here at all, so watch your tone!"

"You think you did me a favor by having me? You didn't do me a favor!"

That's when he left without sitting first on the step to put on his shoes, messing up his whole routine. And now he was in his bedroom slippers and without his jacket.

Brandon walked, fast-furious. Sometimes even that pace was too slow, and he broke into a run until he got out of breath and had to slow to a walk again. Not that there was anywhere to walk to. Some roads went east and west, some went north and south, and some ended up in fields with broken-down tobacco barns.

Brandon wasn't supposed to be out by himself, especially at night, when it was even easier to get lost. But he didn't care. He couldn't stay inside, not tonight, not after all that, because he'd end up throwing things. And he'd worked so long and hard at *not* throwing things anymore. So, he walked. Hard and fast.

Moving quickly kept him warm. Without his jacket, the late September evening was cool.

But tonight, he was too mad to care that he hadn't sat on the step to put on his shoes, and he hadn't reached up to the hook to get his jacket, and he'd left the house in his bedroom slippers.

Her fault. All her fault.

Brandon got to the main intersection of Nixon, where Nixon Road met Wyndham Road. There were no stores or streetlights, like in Simcoe or Delhi or Tillsonburg. There was just a stop sign, and the old Nixon Public School—his old school. And it was just ahead.

It was only one story, only one hallway, small and cozy, easy to find his way around, although it had seemed big at the time. It was closed now. His class was the last one to graduate from there.

Brandon went around the back, where everything was dark and quiet. Cars wouldn't see him back there. If his mom came looking for him, she wouldn't find him.

Bad things had happened to him at this school. Teachers had yelled at him, kids had laughed at him and beaten him. Brandon picked up a rock and threw it at the school, wishing the windows weren't boarded up so he could break the glass. But it was probably a good thing anyway; he'd gotten into trouble breaking the windows before, when he was eight.

With every stone he threw, Brandon remembered something else that made him want to throw more stones. Kids not liking him, teachers not liking him. Sitting forever on that chair outside the principal's office until he couldn't stand it and had to scream and

run around, which landed him more time in the chair. Punishments, detentions, kids making fun. Fumbling the ball in the simplest games, always being a few beats behind everyone else.

Her fault. All her fault.

"Who's throwing rocks? Who's in our space?"

Brandon froze. He knew that voice. It was Dwayne. The dreaded Dwayne.

"Death to whoever it is," said a girl, followed by the sound of giggling.

Four of them came around the corner toward the dark side of the school. Dwayne, Sylvie, Sherry, and Nate. He'd gone to school with them. The boys would just beat him up and then leave him alone. But the girls were worse. They rarely said anything to him; it was all done with looks and whispers and giggles.

"Is that Brandon? Look, everybody. It's our good friend, Brandon."

"We miss you at school, Brandon. Why didn't you sign up for Delhi like the rest of us?"

His mother had called them "the Four Horrors." When she'd found out they were all going to Delhi District, she had enrolled him in Simcoe Composite. "A new start," she'd said. He was glad to be away from them, but it wasn't a new start. It was the same old start, except that he kept getting lost at the high school.

The Four Horrors joined him in throwing stones. They weren't very good. They were all sort of falling over themselves and laughing a lot.

Brandon's feet were getting wet in his slippers. He wanted to leave, but he couldn't concentrate on where else he should go.

"You know what I think? I think Brandon thinks we don't like him," Nate said. "Is that what you think, Brandon?"

"No," said Brandon.

"We should have been nicer to Brandon," Sylvie said, putting her arm around Brandon's waist. "Do you have a girlfriend, Brandon?"

"Sure," he said. "Lots."

"Do you? Is there a special one?"

"Joanne," he said. There was a Joanne in his history class. She spoke up a lot, and Mr. Horton was always saying, "Well done, Joanne. You're right."

"Joanne is a nice name," Sylvie said, making her fingers do little curly motions in his hair. "Is she pretty?" Mostly, he saw the back of Joanne's head, since she sat in front of him. "She has nice hair," he said. "She's really good at history."

"Are you putting the moves on my girl?" Dwayne asked, laughing.

"No!" Brandon showed his hands. "See? No moves."

"Good. Because if you did, I'd have to pound you again. I've pounded you a lot, haven't I, Brandon?" He pulled Sylvie away and started necking with her. "But you've always been a good sport about it, haven't you?" he said, when he came up for air.

"Yeah, Brandon's a good sport," Nate said. "Hey, Brandon, I'll let you make out with Sherry if you want to."

"Hey!" Sherry swatted Nate across his chest.

"Oh, come on, Sherry. Share a little." That made the Four Horrors laugh. "Sharin' Sherry. Share it around. Share and Sherry alike."

Brandon laughed, too.

"Go on, Brandon. Do what you like to do with Joanne. Call it a peace offering from us. We really did like you all those years."

They really *did* like him.

Nate gave Sherry a little push, and Sherry went along, putting her lips to Brandon's. It set off explosions all through Brandon's brain and body. His arm went around her.

"Not too much, Brandon," Nate said. "Remember, she's just a loaner."

In the next instant, Sherry was back with Nate, but they were all laughing. And they were including Brandon in the game.

"Maybe you should transfer to our school," Dwayne said. He took a little plastic bag and some papers out of his pocket, and rolled a joint. He put a match to it, breathed in, and said, "We're getting up a boxing team, but the school can't afford a punching bag." He let the smoke out in a snort, laughing at his own joke.

Brandon laughed with the rest of them.

"I'm hungry," Sherry said. "I need chocolate, or popcorn, or that popcorn with caramel on it. What's that called?"

"Fiddle Faddle," Sylvie said, taking a drag on the joint. "Fiddle Faddle," she said again, which made everyone laugh and laugh.

"You got any money on you, Brandon?"

Brandon pulled all the coins out of his pocket. There was a bunch of bigger coins mixed in with the smaller ones, the ones that weren't worth as much. Money took concentration. Dimes were worth more than nickels, but they were smaller. It didn't make any sense. He handed it all over to Dwayne.

"Thanks, Brandon. Now all we need is a store."

"Fiddle Faddle!" Sylvie yelled. "Fiddle Faddle!" It turned into a chant.

They all started shouting, "Fiddle Faddle! Fiddle Faddle!"

Just as Brandon opened his mouth to join in, Dwayne put his arm back and threw all of the coins up onto the roof of the school. Brandon heard them fall.

"Think you can get onto the roof?" Dwayne asked him.

"You get those coins off the roof, and I'll let you make out with Sherry again," Nate said.

Sherry gave Nate another swat and said, "He kisses better than you do. Keep loaning me out and I may stay that way. Owwww!" she screeched, as Nate twisted her fingers back.

"Up you go, Brandon. We're still hungry."

Brandon started looking for a drainpipe or some other way to boost himself up, but he never got the chance.

The gleam of headlights started to approach from the side driveway.

"Cops," said Nate.

"Here, Brandon. Hold this for us and keep your mouth shut. And then you can be our friend." Dwayne tucked the little plastic bag with the marijuana in it into the front pocket of Brandon's jeans, just as the police car rounded the corner of the school.

Friends, thought Brandon, happily. I have friends.

His mother hadn't ruined everything, after all.