

3.

American Flyer

Okay, back to the down under, right? My room in the basement. Scuttle into your dim hole in the ground, Maxwell dear. Big goon like you, growing about an inch a day, and this midget kid, this crippled little humanoid, he actually *scared* you. Not the kind of scare that makes your knee bones feel like water, more the kind of scare where you go whoa! I don't understand this, I don't get it, what's going on?

Like calling me "earthling." Which by itself is pretty weird, right? I already mentioned a few of the names I've been called, but until the robot boy showed up, nobody had ever called me *earthling*, and so I'm lying on my mattress there in the great down under, and it comes to me that he's right, I *am* an earthling, we're all of us earthlings, but we don't call each other earthling. No need. Because it's the same thing that in this country we're all Americans, but we don't go around to people and say, "Excuse me, Ameri-

can, can you tell me how to get to the nearest 7 Eleven?"

So I'm thinking about that for a while, lying there in the cellar dark, and pretty soon the down under starts to get small, like the walls are shrinking, and I go up the bulkhead stairs into the back yard and find a place where I can check it out.

There's this one scraggly tree behind the little freak's house, right? Like a stick in the ground with a few wimped-out branches. And there he is, hardly any bigger now than he was in day care, and he's standing there waving his crutch up at the tree.

I kind of slide over to the chain-link fence, get a better angle on the scene. What's he *doing* whacking at that crummy tree? Trying to jump up and hit this branch with his little crutch, and he's mad, hopping mad. Only he can't really jump, he just makes this jumping kind of motion. His feet never leave the ground.

Then what he does, he throws down the crutch and he gets down on his hands and knees and crawls back to his house. If you didn't know, you would think he was like a kindergarten creeper who forgot how to walk, he's that small. And he crawls real good, better than he can walk. Before you know it, he's dragging this wagon out from under the steps.

Rusty red thing, one of those old American Flyer models. Anyhow, the little freak is tugging

it backwards, a few inches at a time. Chugging along until he gets that little wagon under the tree. Next thing he picks up his crutch and he climbs in the wagon and he stands up and he's whacking at the tree again.

By now I've figured out that there's something stuck up in the branches and he wants to get it down. This small, bright-colored thing, looks like a piece of folded paper. Whatever it is, that paper thing, he wants it real bad, but even with the wagon there's no way he can reach it. No way.

So I go over there to his back yard, trying to be really quiet, but I'm no good at sneaking up, not with these humongous feet, and he turns and faces me with that crutch raised up like he's ready to hit a grand slam on my head.

He wants to say something, you can tell that much, but he's so mad, he's all huffed up and the noise he makes, it could be from a dog or something, and he sounds like he can hardly breathe.

What I do, I keep out of range of that crutch and just reach up and pick the paper thing right out of the tree. Except it's not a paper thing. It's a plastic bird, light as a feather. I have to hold it real careful or it might break, that's how flimsy it is.

I go, "You want this back or what?"

The little freak is staring at me bug-eyed, and he goes, "Oh, it talks."

I give him the bird-thing. "What is it, like a model airplane or something?"

You can tell he's real happy to have the bird-thing back, and his face isn't quite so fierce. He sits down in the wagon, and he goes, "This is an ornithopter. An ornithopter is defined as an experimental device propelled by flapping wings. Or you could say that an ornithopter is just a big word for mechanical bird."

That's how he talked, like right out of a dictionary. So smart you can hardly believe it. While he's talking he's winding up the bird-thing. There's this elastic band inside, and he goes, "Observe and be amazed, earthling," and then he lets it go, and you know what? I *am* amazed, because it does fly just like a little bird, flitting up and down and around, higher than I can reach.

I chase after the thing until it boinks against the scrawny tree trunk and I bring it back to him and he winds it up again and makes it fly. We keep doing that, it must be for almost an hour, until finally the elastic breaks. I figure that's it, end of ornithopter, but he says something like, "All mechanical objects require periodic maintenance. We'll schedule installation of a new propulsion unit as soon as the Fair Gwen of Air gets a replacement."

Even though I'm not sure what he means, I go, "That's cool."

"You live around here, earthling?"

"Over there." I point out the house. "In the down under."

He goes, "What?" and I figure it's easier to show him than explain all about Gram and Grim and the room in the cellar, so I pick up the handle to the American Flyer wagon and I tow him over.

It's real easy, he doesn't weigh much and I'm pretty sure I remember looking back and seeing him sitting up in the wagon happy as can be, like he's really enjoying the ride and not embarrassed to have me pulling him around.

But like Freak says later in this book, you can remember anything, whether it happened or not. All I'm really sure of is he never hit me with that crutch.

4. *What Frightened the Fair Gwen*

Freak's not in my room for ten minutes before he sets me straight on the Fair Gwen. He's able to hump down the steps by himself, except it makes him sort of out of breath, you can hear him wheezing or I guess you'd call it panting, like a dog does on a hot day. He gets into my room and I close the bulkhead door, and he goes, "Cool. You get to live down here all by yourself?"

"I eat upstairs with Grim and Gram."

Freak works himself up onto the foot of my bed and uses a pillow to make himself comfortable. It's pretty dim down here, only the daylight from one basement window, but it catches him just right and makes his eyes shine. "Gram must be your grandmother," he says. "Grim would be, I suppose, a sobriquet for your grandfather, based on his demeanor."

I go, "Huh?"

Freak grins and pushes back his yellow hair, and he goes, "Pardon my vocabulary. Sobriquet

means 'nickname,' and demeanor means 'expression.' I merely postulated that you call your grandfather 'Grim' because he's grim. Postulate means — "

"I know," I say. Which is a lie, except I can guess what he means, figure it out that way. "So how come you call your mom 'Fair Gwen of Air,' is that a nickname?"

Freak is shaking his head. I can see he's trying not to let on that he's laughing inside. "Guinevere," he finally says, catching his breath. "The Fair Guinevere, from the legend of King Arthur. You know about King Arthur, right?"

I shrug. The only King Arthur I know is the brand of flour Gram uses, and if I say that I'll really sound like a butthead.

He goes, "My mom's name is Gwen, so sometimes I call her the Fair Guinevere or the Fair Gwen. King Arthur was the first king of England, way back when there were still dragons and monsters in the world. Arthur was this wimpy little kid, an orphan, and there was this magic sword stuck in a big stone, okay? The old king had died, and whoever could pull the sword from the stone proved he was the next king. All these big tough dudes came from all over to yank at the sword and they couldn't budge it. One day this wimpy little kid tried it when nobody was looking and the sword slipped out like it was stuck in butter."

"So he was the king, this little kid?"

Freak nods, he's really into this story, and he's

making shapes in the air with his hands. This is the first time for me, hearing Freak really talk, and right away I know one thing: When he's talking, you can't take your eyes off of him. His hands are moving, and it's like he's really seeing it, this story about an old king.

"Arthur's magical sword is called Excalibur, and the Fair Guinevere is this pretty girl who becomes his queen. 'Fair' in those days meant the same as 'beautiful' does now. Anyhow, Arthur got bored just sitting around, so he invited all the knights of England to come live in the castle. They all ate supper at this round table, which is why they were called the Knights of the Round Table. Every now and then King Arthur would send them off on a special secret mission, which in the old days they called a 'quest.' They had to slay dragons and monsters and evil knights. I assume you know what a knight wears into battle?"

I think so, but I like hearing Freak talk, so I go, "Better tell me," and that's when I find out why he's so interested in some clanky old knights.

Because Freak really lights up and he goes, "The knights were like the first human version of robots. They wore this metal armor to protect them and make them invincible. When I get my stuff unpacked I'll show you the pictures. It's pretty amazing, really, that hundreds of years before they had computers they were already

attempting to exceed the design limitations of the human body."

I go, "Huh?" and Freak sort of chuckles to himself, like he expected me to go "Huh?" and he says, "The design limitations of the human body. You know, like we're not bullet-proof and we can't crush rocks with our bare hands, and if we touch a hot stove we get burned. King Arthur wanted to *improve* his men, so he made them armor-plated. Then he programmed them to go out and do these quests, slay the dragons and so on, which is sort of how they program robots right now."

I go, "I thought there weren't any real robots. Just in the movies."

Boy does that make his eyes blaze. Like whoa! talk about laser beams! He's like *fuming*, so upset he can hardly talk.

Finally he gets control of himself and he goes, "I suppose I must make allowances for your ignorance. On the subject of robots you are clearly misinformed. Robots are not just in the movies. Robotics, the science of designing and building functional robots, is a *huge* industry. There are *thousands* of robot units presently in use. *Millions* of them. They don't look like the robots you see in movies, of course, because they're designed according to function. Many robotic devices are in fact sophisticated assembly units, machines that put together cars and trucks and computers. For instance, the space shuttle has a robot arm."

"Right," I say. "I saw that on TV."

Freak sighs and rolls his eyes. "Ah, yes," he says. "Television, the opiate of the masses."

For about the eleventh time I go, "Huh?"

"Opiate, a drug," he says. "Massive, that means large and heavy. Thus television is the drug of fat heads. Opiate of the masses."

"You don't have a TV?"

"Of course I have a television," he says. "How else could I watch *Star Trek*? Matter of fact, I watch *tons* of tube, but I also read tons of books so I can figure out what's true and what's fake, which isn't always easy. Books are like truth serum — if you don't read, you can't figure out what's real."

This time I don't say *huh* because then I might have to explain how I'm an L.D., and reading books is the last thing I want to do, right after trimming my toenails with a lawn mower, gargling nails, and eating worms for breakfast. Of course Freak has probably already guessed I'm a learning disabled, because he's had a look around my room and it isn't exactly the public library.

"I'll lend you some of my books," he says.

"Cool," I say, like it's just what I've been waiting for, another chance to prove I'm a butthead.

Then we both hear it at the same time, this voice calling his name and sounding real worried.

"The Fair Gwen," he says. "I gotta beam out of here."

I go up and open the bulkhead door and his

mother is in the back yard and she's looking at the little red wagon. She catches sight of me coming up out of the down under and it's like somebody shot her. Like she's scared out of her mind. "Kevin?" she says. "I'm looking for a little boy."

Freak is huffing and puffing as he humps himself up the steps, and the Fair Gwen grabs Freak and puts him in the wagon and I swear, she almost *runs* home, like if she doesn't get away quick something really bad is going to happen. Freak is in the wagon and he's trying to look back at me, trying to shrug his shoulders and let me know he doesn't understand what got into the Fair Gwen, but I know.

It's pretty simple, really. She's scared of me.

5.

Spitting Image

There's a place I go inside my head sometimes. It's cool and dim in there and you float like a cloud — no, you *are* a cloud, the kind you see in the sky on a windy day, the way they keep changing shape except you can't really *see* it changing? It just sort of happens, and suddenly you realize the cloud that looks like a big hand with fat fingers now looks like a catcher's mitt, or a big soft TV set? Like that.

Anyhow, I went there right after the Fair Gwen ran off with that look on her face, like: What was he *doing* with my poor little boy, stealing him away in the wagon?

What I do is lie on the floor under my bed, where you can just barely see the bedsprings and stuff because it's so dark, and before long I'm somewhere else, sort of floating, and it's so cool and empty in there, you don't have to think about anything. You're nothing, you're nobody, nothing matters, you're not even there. *Time out.*

Except this time I can't stay as long as I'd like