

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

because Gram is knocking on the door. Going, "Maxwell? Max, are you there? Please answer me, dear, it's important."

Yeah, right. But I wedge out from under the bed — there's getting to be less and less room under there — and I dust myself off and open the door. There's no lock, but Gram has this thing about waiting until I say come in, she makes a big deal about not intruding.

"Maxwell," she says, and she takes a little step inside the room and you can tell she'd rather not be here, she makes this face because the place is dark and messy and probably it smells like my socks or whatever. "Max, dear, I'm sorry to bother you — you know I *never* come into the basement — but I just got a call from Gwen Avery and I think it's important."

Uh-oh, I'm thinking. Now the Fair Gwen is calling up my Gram, probably to report a great hulking beast that lives in the cellar, and I close up inside, waiting for the worst.

"She called to say how sorry she was," Gram is saying.

"Huh?"

"I guess she came to pick up her little boy, is that right? You and Kevin were making friends?"

Making friends. What a wet idea *that* is, but Gram gets her feelings hurt pretty easy, so I don't actually say that. What I say is, "Yeah, I guess so."

Gram is uneasy, I can see her eyes flitting nervously around the room, like she's crossing

the border into a really foreign country. This is as good a place as any to mention that even though Gram is my grandmother, she doesn't look like a granny, she looks more like a mother because she was, as she always says, "a mere child myself" when my real mother was born.

"Well, uhm, I get the impression poor Gwen wasn't expecting to see you looking so big, and now she thinks she's offended you. Does that make any sense?"

"I guess so. You know her, huh?"

"Oh my yes," says Gram. "Gwen was a good friend of your mother's. They were both pregnant at the same time. Then later on you and little Kevin went to the same day care, did you know that?"

I give a shrug because I don't really like Gram to know how much I remember about way back then.

Gram is saying, "She said — she especially wanted me to tell you this, Max — she said she's delighted that you and Kevin are going to be friends. That's the word she used — delighted. And she's inviting you to supper."

First thing, without thinking, I say, "Do I have to?"

Gram reaches out and she puts her hand on my shoulder, real light and feathery, you can feel how nervous she is just to touch me, and how it makes her uncomfortable to have to look up at me, because did I mention I'm a lot bigger

than Gram? Bigger than Grim, too? Bigger than most people? It's true.

Gram says, "She feels bad about how she treated you, Maxwell, dear, and she wants to make it up to you. You don't *have* to go, but it would be the right thing to do."

"It was no big deal," I say. "She just ran away is all. I guess I scared her."

"It wasn't you," Gram says.

"No? Then who was it scared her?"

Now she's got her tongue stuck, and you can see her swallowing in her throat, like her mouth is dry. "I'll just leave that to Gwen," she says. "She's quite a remarkable young woman, you know. Raising that poor boy all on her own."

"He's not a poor boy," I say. "You should hear him talk. I think the rest of him is so small because his brain is so big."

"Yes," says Gram. "Well well."

Gram is always saying that, well well, like it means something, which I guess it does to her. Anyhow, I agree to have supper with Freak and his mom, even though the idea of it makes me feel tensed up, like there is a hand inside my stomach and the hand is, you know, making a fist.

It turns out to be not so bad. The Fair Gwen, right away she's beaming at me, bouncing around the kitchen and talking a mile a minute, so fast the words kind of smooch together.

"SodidSusanexcusemeyourgrandmothermen-

tionyourmomandIwerepalsthat is . . . untilshe gotmarriedexcusemeI never . . . *could* abide thatmanIalwaysthoughtthewascrazyand . . . scary isitokaytosaythatyou . . . won'tbeoffended?"

It's like this delay while I sort it out, and then I go, "Yeah, Gram told me," and the stuff about her knowing my father and thinking he was sick in the head, I decide no comment is the way to go.

"You were the cutest little baby," Gwen says.

"I remember like it was yesterday. We were all of us living over in the tenements in those days, because the rent was so cheap and we were all just starting out."

Freak is on the floor, digging through the packing boxes for pots and pans and stuff, he's almost inside this box, all you can see is his funny little rear end sticking out. You'd think he was maybe two years old, that's how small he is, until you notice where his leg brace makes a lump in his pants.

From inside the box he goes, "Hey, Gwen, leave the guy alone, huh? You're going spastic."

"Am I?" Gwen asks. She's at the counter, going through drawers and looking for spoons or whatever. "Sorry, Max. That is, I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot. It's just, you know . . ."

Freak's head pops out of the box and he's got this wicked know-it-all grin. "What she means is, you're a spitting image of your old man."

Gwen says, "Kevin, please," and her voice is

real small, like she's embarrassed.

"Yeah," I say. "Everybody says that."

"They do?"

I shrug. Is it really such a big deal for a boy to look like his father? Which is typical butthead thinking, because of course it's a big deal, if your father happens to be in prison. Which everybody in town knows about, it's not like there's any secret about what he did or why he's there, except everybody *acts* like it should be a secret, and the bigger I grow and the more I look like my old man, the worse it gets.

"You really knew him?" I say. "I mean him and my mom when they were together?"

"Not very well," Gwen says. She's looking for a knife to slice open a pack of hot dogs. "I never saw much of your mom after they got married. He made it . . . difficult for your mother to have any friends."

There's a knife on the table and I pick it up and hand it to the Fair Gwen. She doesn't flinch away and I decide she's okay, she's really pretty cool.

"So," Freak is saying. "When do we eat? My fuel cells are depleted."

Supper is great. The Fair Gwen makes this really tasty potato salad with spices and stuff, way better than the mushy stuff Gram makes, and we have hot dogs fried in a pan with the buns toasted up butter-crisp just the way I like, and two kinds of relish and three kinds of mus-

tard, and red onions cut up real small.

We sit out in the back yard eating from paper plates, and Freak tells robot stories that are so strange and funny I'm laughing like a maniac and then I'm choking and Freak is pounding me on the back.

"Expel the object!" Freak shouts. "Regurgitate, you big moron!" and he gives me another thump and I cough up this yucky mess, but I'm still laughing so hard my nose is running.

What a goon, except it really *is* funny, me trying to sneeze a hot dog through my nose, and we're both laughing like total morons.

"This is great," Gwen says, looking at Freak and me. "I'm so glad we decided to move back, you know? I feel like we're all getting a fresh start."

It's time to go home, Gram gets nervous if I'm not back before dark. Everything seems really great, just like Gwen says, except when I lie down on my bed it hits me, boom, and I'm crying like a baby. And the really weird thing is, I'm happy.

6. *Close Encounter of the Turd Kind*

Fourth of July, right? Everybody goes nuts. The dads are getting drunk and having their cook-outs, and the moms are trying to keep all the brats from blowing their precious little pinkies off with cherry bombs, and the kids are running wild through the back yards. It's like no rules apply, and that makes everything real *edgy*, if you know what I mean, like let's have a blast and who cares what happens.

Don't get the wrong idea. I *love* the Fourth. It's just that people tend to get all choked up about firecracker holidays, and they don't see what's *really* going on, which like I say is the dads swilling beer and acting numb, that's the basic formula.

Not that Grim ever swills anything stronger than root beer. No way. The poison never crossed his lips, he likes to say, even though I've seen a picture of him in the army and that sure *looks* like a bottle of beer in his hand, and he's got that same wacked-by-a-hammer grin that

dudes always get when they're drinking.

Anyhow, this is the first year I get to go to the fireworks without Grim and Gram, which I've never understood, because it's right down by the millpond where I've been allowed to go for years, so why should it make a difference just because about a million people show up to watch the rockets' red glare over that smelly pond?

The deal this year is that I get to go with Freak, which Gram thinks is a good idea because she's afraid he'll get crushed or something, she actually thinks people are going to *step* on him, which just goes to show how brainless she can be sometimes, and scared of everything. I mean nobody steps on little kids down there, so why should they step on Freak?

Turns out the thing to worry about is not kidstompers, but beer swillers, like I mentioned before. Because Freak and I are still a couple of blocks from the pond, just kind of easing our way along, when these punks start mouth-ing off.

"Hey you! Mutt and Jeff! Frankenstein and Igor! Don't look around, I'm talkin' to you, bone-heads. What is this, a freak show?"

I know that voice. Tony D., they call him Blade, he's at least seventeen and he's already been to juvy court three, four times. I heard he cut a guy with a razor, he almost died, and everybody says the best way to handle Tony D.

and his gang is, you avoid them. Cross the street, hide, whatever it takes.

"Yeah you," he goes, and he's doing his hip-pity walk, strutting along, he's got these fancy cool cowboy boots with metal toes. "Yeah, Andre the giant and the dwarf, hold on a sec, I want a word with you."

Only the way he talks, he goes ah wanna woid weecha, except it's bad enough having to listen to the creep, I don't want to have to spell the dumb way he talks. Anyhow, big mistake, we stop and wait for Tony D., alias the bad-news Blade.

"Got any, dudes?" he asks, pretending like he's friendly. He's a couple feet away, but you can smell the beer on his breath. Also it smells like he ate something dead, for instance road kill, but maybe that's my imagination.

"Pay attention," Tony D. says. "I asked did you got any."

Freak, his chest is all puffed out and his chin looks hard and he's looking right up at Tony D., and he says, "Got any what?"

Tony D. has his hands on his hips and his punkster pals are trying to get closer, working through the crowd. He leans over Freak and he says, "Boomers, you little freak. M80s. Maybe a rack of cherry bombs, is that what's making a lump in your pocket, huh?"

Freak starts to hump himself away, trying to walk faster than he really can, which makes his leg brace bump against the ground. "Come

along, Maxwell," he says over his shoulder. "Ignore the cretin."

Blade goes, "Hey what?" and he moves right in front of Freak. "Want to say that again, little freak man?"

Freak says, "Cretin. C-R-E-T-I-N. Defined as one who suffers from mental deficiency."

Hearing how little tiny Freak is dissing the fearsome Tony D., alias Blade, I can't help it, I laugh out loud. Tony D. is looking up at me and he's showing his white teeth, I swear they've been sharpened to look like vampire teeth, and I go, "Uh-oh," and start to get real cold inside. Real icy, because I can see that Blade is trying to make up his mind, is he going to fight me, or is he just going to kill me quick?

Just then I hear the whoop of a siren and like a miracle this cop car comes out of nowhere, heading for the millpond, and Blade takes one look and he and his punksters are out of there, burning rubber in their Reeboks.

Freak goes, "Whew! That was a close encounter of the turd kind," and it takes me a second to get the joke, but then I'm laughing, amazed he can be so cool about it, like it was no big deal that Tony D. was after us.

"You *can* take him, right?" he asks a couple minutes later.

I go, "Are you kidding? You can't just fight Blade, you have to fight his gang, too."

"You mean you *couldn't* take him and I was giving him lip?"

"That's about the size of it."

Freak goes, "Oh my *gawwwwwwd!*" and he's shrieking and laughing and whooping it up so loud that everybody is looking at us like we're total goons, which isn't far from the truth.

Freak hasn't got his crutch tonight, just the leg brace, and he's laughing so hard he falls down. Not that he has far to go. Anyhow, I pick him up and I'm amazed how light he is. Like it's *nothing* for me to lift him, and maybe that's where I get the idea. Because later, when we're down by the pond and the first of the rockets is streaking up, up, up, Freak is making a fuss because he can't see. There are so many people crowded around, all he can see are feet and knees, and people are lifting their little kids up to see the fireworks explode like hot pink flowers in the sky, and so I just sort of reach down without thinking and pick up Freak and set him on my shoulders.

He's kind of trembly up there until he grabs hold of my hair to steady himself, and then the first really big rocket whams off, a humongous *thud!* I can feel in my stomach, and Freak is shouting, "Awwww *right!*" and I know it's okay, he's not flipped out because I picked him up and put him on my shoulders like he was a little kid instead of possibly the smartest human being in the whole world.

"Magnesium!" he shouts as the white sparkles glitter down over the pond. "Potassium chlorate!" as the shells go womp-womp-womp and

everybody goes ooooooh. "Potassium nitrate! Sulphur! Aluminum!" And after a burst of hot red fire in the sky, Freak tugs my hair and screams, "Copper! That's copper powder combusting with oxygen!" And when the fire blossoms are flashing blue he goes, "Good old strontium nitrate!" and I'm thinking whoa! is there anything this little dude *doesn't* know?

At the end, like always, they have a thing they call the "grand finale," when they just go nuts and light off everything at once and it sounds like World War III, whizzing and banging and popping, and there's so much hot stuff falling from the sky you can hear it sizzling in the pond. Freak keeps on shouting out the names of chemicals and elements, until the last spark dies in that scummy pond and the crowd cheers and then everybody tries to leave at once, like a bunch of morons.