

7.
*Walking High
Above the World*

You ever notice how the smell of gunpowder makes you thirsty? Because after the fireworks I'm aiming us for where the food carts are parked along the street, thinking about an ice-cold lemonade, how *clean* it will taste, and for a moment I almost forget that Freak is riding on my shoulders.

"Amazing perspective up here," he's saying. "This is what you see all the time."

"I'm not *that* big," I say. "This way you're like two feet taller than me."

"Cool," he says. "I love it."

We're working our way through the crowd and we're almost to the food carts when Freak tugs on my hair. "Cretin at two o'clock," he says, real urgent. "Two more at three o'clock."

I go, "Huh? What?"

"The Blade and his gang," Freak hisses. "They've locked on to us. Their trajectory is converging. Go to the left," he says. "Make it quick, if you want to live!"

Too bad I'm a little confused about rights and lefts. If I don't think about it I know, but if I have to think about it quick my mind goes blank. Right? Left? What does it all *mean*?

"Left!" Freak says, and he kicks me with his little foot, like he's digging into a horse and it clicks in my head. Go that way! Follow the feet! "Faster," Freak is saying, and he's urging me on, it's lucky for me the little dude doesn't have any spurs, but I don't care, I just want to get clear of Blade.

"Warp factor nine!" Freak is shouting. "More speed, o mighty beast!"

Now I'm running at a full gallop, weaving through the crowd, and I don't even need to look back, all I have to do is follow the way Freak is kicking his feet, steering me. I'm pretty sure we're getting away until this punk comes out of nowhere, he's one of Blade's gang and he's got this big ugly grin.

"Over here! Tony! Got 'em cornered!"

"What do I do?" I say to Freak.

He goes, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!"

I can hear Blade before I can see him. Hear his wicked laugh, so mean and dirty it makes my stomach freeze up and my knees feel squishy.

"You! The freak! You and that giant retard, I'll cut you down to size. Dice and slice, baby! Freak show time!"

And now I can see him, see that pointed white grin and his eyes so dark and cruel, and he's

swaggering through the crowd, he's got us surrounded with punks, everywhere I turn there's another mean face trying to look as tough as Tony D.

In a small voice I say, "Tell me what to do," and Freak pats me on the shoulder and says, "Just give me a nanosecond to process the alternatives."

"Slice and dice!" That's Blade, and he's reaching into his back pocket.

"Make it quick," I hiss, and then Freak is kicking my right shoulder and I turn that way and he's saying "Go! Go!" and I run right over this punk, he's so surprised he loses his bubble gum and he tries to grab my leg but I kick free and I'm running right and then left, running blind and just letting Freak decide which way we should go because he must have a plan, a dude as smart as that.

Which I'm right about, he *does* have a plan. Only the plan is to run out into the smelly mill-pond and drown us both.

"Go on!" he's shouting from up above my head. "Trust me, we'll be okay!"

Blade is shouting, too, and I can hear his feet pitter-pattering behind me. Catching up.

"Warp speed!" Freak is shouting, and he's kicking with both feet now, which means go straight. "Head for the H₂O!"

The pond is right ahead of me, and I'm sort of running along the edge, crunching over the bottles and cans and candy wrappers, and then

I hear this zingy sound and I just know that Blade is swinging a knife, cutting the air right behind us, and there's nowhere to go but into the pond, like Freak wants me to.

I almost lose it right there, taking that first step, because it's a gunky pond and the mud is really oozy and deep and it sucks right up to my knees. But I'm so scared of getting cut by Tony D., so scared he might *bite* me with those wicked teeth, I just keep going. There's this great ugly *sucking* sound as my feet come back up out of the mud and I stretch out as far as my legs will go and I take another step and I just keep going.

I'm going so fast that the water is up to my chest before Freak gets my attention, he's tugging at my hair with both hands. "Whoa!" he's saying, "slow up, we did it."

The mud is up around my knees and it's real hard to turn around. Finally I get so I'm facing back at the shore and there's Blade, just his head above the water, and he looks all white and scared. "Help!" he's blubbering, choking on that dirty water, and then his punksters are splashing in to rescue him. Man, they can hardly get him loose, the way he's stuck deep in that mud, and before they drag him to shore they're all covered with slime and mud. They're gasping like fish, almost too tired to cuss us out, but that doesn't last.

Blade is covered with mud right up to his neck, which on him looks natural. He turns to his

gang, who look as slimy as he does. "Get some rocks, it's target-practice time!"

"What do we do now?" I ask, because the mud is still sucking me down. It's over my knees now, and the water is right up under my arms and even Freak's feet are getting wet.

"Wait," Freak says. "The cavalry is coming, can't you hear that bugle?"

I'm listening, but I can't hear anything except for Blade and his gang, and how they're scrambling around trying to find some rocks to heave at us.

I can see Blade rearing back to throw, and the first one misses us.

"Can you move?" Freak says.

"I don't think so."

It's true. The mud is up over my knees, and I'm locked in place. I can't even fall down, that's how stiff it is. I'm like a big fence post, and everybody knows a fence post makes a good target.

More splashes as the rocks fall short. At first they're throwing stuff that's too heavy. Pretty soon they smarten up, and Blade says, "Smaller rocks! Get me smaller rocks!" and I know in my heart we're doomed.

Then up above me there's this really loud, high-pitched screech. Freak has his fingers in his mouth and he's whistling. Real shrill and shivery and so loud it almost hurts my ears. And then I see what Freak has been seeing all along, a cop car cruising real slow along the road around the

pond, which is what they always do after the fireworks.

Freak is whistling and the cop car spotlight comes beaming around the pond until it settles on us. I'm blinking because the light is so bright, and Freak is making a fuss and waving his arms and we hear the metal megaphone sound of a cop voice ordering us not to move. Like we could even if we wanted!

It's hard to see in the glare of the spotlight, but Freak tells me that Blade and his punks are running away. Like snakes on sneakers, Freak says.

"Officers!" Freak is shouting into the white light. "We request assistance!"

They finally have to use ropes to pull me out of there. Freak won't let go, he stays right where he is on top of my shoulders even when this cop in a boat tries to lift him off, and then we're up on the bank of the pond and everybody is being real nice and giving us blankets and Cokes and saying they know all about Tony D., they'll keep an eye on him, don't you worry.

"Okay, boys, you'd better give us your names and we'll call your mothers," this one cop is saying, and there's this other guy who is looking at me funny and he says, "Hey, isn't that Kenny Kane's boy? Must be. Old Killer Kane, is he still inside?"

Freak is still holding tight to my shoulders and when they ask him for his name, he says, "We're

Freak the Mighty, that's who we are. We're nine feet tall, in case you haven't noticed."

That's how it started, really, how we got to be Freak the Mighty, slaying dragons and fools and walking high above the world.

8.

Dinosaur Brain

It turned out to be a cool summer.

I figured we'd get in trouble for running into the pond. It looked bad for a while when the cops drove us home and I got out all soaking wet and covered with gook, and when Grim was hosing me down he had this really pruneey look on his face, like he was smelling something bad, but the cops made out like I was a hero or something, rescuing the poor crippled midget kid. So Grim listens to the cops and then he gives me this weird look, like, *imagine my surprise*, and he goes in the house and then Gram comes running out in her nightgown with this big fluffy towel and she really makes a fuss.

Me rescuing Freak. What a joke, right? Except that's how it must have looked from a distance, because they never knew it was Freak who rescued me — or his genius brain and my big dumb body.

Gram is there rubbing me with the towel and her hands are shaking and she's saying, "Oh, I

saw those blue lights and I thought the worst," and Grim is behind her looking at me real intense and shaking his head, and he's saying, "Who'd a thunk it, Mabel," which is some kind of joke because Gram's name isn't Mabel.

Anyhow, they take me inside and the first thing Gram does is give me a bowl of ice cream, and Grim, he keeps shaking his head and he goes, "What this young man needs is a cup of coffee. Real coffee," and then he gets busy putting the filter in the machine and measuring out the coffee and standing by while it drips through, and he's got this stern look like he's thinking deep thoughts. By the time I polish off the ice cream, Grim is handing me coffee in a china cup, from the set they never use.

He gives me that cup like it's a really big deal, maybe because I'm not allowed to drink coffee yet, and he's so Grim-like and serious I open my mouth to say what's the big deal, you really think this is my first cup of coffee (yeah, right!), and something happens and the words come out: "Thank you, sir," and it's like I'm possessed or something, I've no idea where the things I'm saying are coming from, or why.

I go, "Thanks for the towel, Gram. And the ice cream. Could I have sugar in the coffee? Two teaspoons, please," and Grim claps his hands together and he says, "Of course you can, son," and it's like *whoa!* because he never calls me that. Always Max or Maxwell or "that boy."

Next thing he's clearing his throat and coughing into his fist and Gram is looking at the two of us and she gets this Gram-like glow, like this is how it's supposed to be, the way things always happen on *The Wonder Years*, with the family getting all gooey and sentimental about some numb thing the bratty kid did while he's having all his wonderful years or whatever.

Gram says, "I want you to promise me something, Maxwell dear. Promise me you'll keep away from the hoodlum boy and his awful friends. Nobody got hurt this time, but I shudder to think what *might* have happened."

And Grim, bless his pointed little head, he goes, "Maxwell can handle himself, can't you, uh, Max?"

Right. *Uh, Max.* Not son. Which is okay by me.

"I can run," I say to Gram. "I see Tony D., that's what I'll do."

"Good boy," Gram says. "I thought, because you're so much bigger than he is . . . well, you just do that, dear. You run away."

"He's not running away," Grim says, real impatient. "He's taking evasive action. Avoiding a confrontation. That's a very different thing, right, Max?"

I nod and drink my coffee without slurping and decide it's better not to mention that Tony D. carries a knife and he's probably got guns,

too, because then Gram would only worry and she's such a clunker when she's worried.

Like I said, it turns out to be a pretty cool summer. Usually what I do is just hang around and look at my comic books and watch the tube, or go shopping with Gram if she really makes a fuss. I hate the beach because the beach is stupid, the cool crowd looking sleek and tanned and aren't-we-gorgeous?, and because if you saw me lying on a blanket you'd go, hey, why is that albino walrus wearing sunglasses?

So mostly I just vegetate in the basement and pick my navel, to quote Grim, Mr. Belly Button Lint himself.

Freak changes all that. Each and every morning the little dude humps himself over and he bangs on the bulkhead, wonka-wonka-wonka, he may be small but he sure is noisy. "Get outta bed, you lazy beast! There are fair maidens to rescue! Dragons to slay!" which is what he says every single morning, exactly the same thing, until it's like he's this alarm clock and as soon as I hear the wonka-wonka-wonka of him beating the bulkhead, I know what's coming next: fair maidens and dragons, and Freak with that wake-up-the-world grin of his, going, "Hurry up with the cereal, how can you eat that much, you big ox, come on, let's do something," he's so full of eveready energy you can practically hear his brain humming, and he never can sit still.

"Ants in the pants," I say one morning when

he's ready to yank the cereal bowl off the table, he's in such a hurry to do something, and he goes, "What?" and I go, "You must have ants in your pants," and he gets this funny look and he goes, "That's what the Fair Gwen always says, did she tell you to say that?" and I shake my head and finish the cereal real slow and Freak goes, "For your information there are two thousand two hundred and forty-seven known subspecies of hymenopteran insects, Latin name Formicidae, and none of them are in my pants."

Which cracks me up, even though I don't understand a word he's saying.

"I propose a quest," he says. "We shall journey far to the East and see what lies there."

By now I know what a quest is because Freak has explained the whole deal, how it started with King Arthur trying to keep all his knights busy by making them do things that proved how strong and brave and smart they were, or sometimes how totally numb, because how else can you explain dudes running around inside big clunky tin cans and praying all the time? Which I don't mention to Freak because he's very sensitive about knights and quests and secret meanings. Like how a dragon isn't really just a big slimy fire-breathing monster, it's a symbol of nature or something.

"A dragon is fear of the natural world," Freak says. "An archetype of the unknown."

I go, "What's an archy-type?" and Freak sighs

and shakes his head and reaches into his knapsack for his dictionary.

This is true. He really *does* keep a dictionary in his knapsack, it's his favorite book, and he pulls it out like Arnold Schwarzenegger pulling out a machine gun or something, that's the fierce look he gets with a book in his hands.

"Go on," he says, making me take the book, "look it up." And now I wish I hadn't said anything about this archetype dude because I *hate* looking up stuff in his stupid dictionary.

"Start with A," he says.

"I know that."

"A-R," he says. "Just go along the A's until you come to A-R."

Yeah, right. Easy for a genius to use the dictionary, since he already knows how to spell the words. And R's never look like backward E's to Freak, which is the way they look to me sometimes, unless I really squint and think about it.

"Careful," he says. "You'll bite off your tongue and then we'll have to waste the day at the emergency room, getting it reattached. *Microsurgery* is *such* a bore, didn't anybody ever tell you that?"

"Huh?" I say, but I do close my mouth so my tongue doesn't stick out. I'm still looking in the dictionary for "archetype" and I'm looking for words that are underlined with red ink, because that's what Freak does the first time he looks up a word, he makes a line under it, and you'd be amazed how many are underlined, there are

whole *pages* like that, where he's looked up every single word.

Finally he spells out all the letters for me, and I find the stupid word.

"There's nothing about dragons here," I say, squinting hard at the stuff under the word. "It just says 'pattern.' So what is it, a sewing type of thing?"

Freak has this disgusted look and he takes the dictionary and he goes, "You're hopeless. Pattern is the first definition. I was referring to the *second* definition, which is much more interesting. 'A universal symbol or idea in the psyche, expressed in dreams or dreamlike images.'"

Like that helps, right? I'm getting bored with the dictionary, so I pretend to understand and Freak finally gives up and he shakes his head and goes, "I don't know why I bother. Dinosaurs had brains the size of peanuts and they ruled the earth for a hundred million years."