

EVEL KNIEVEL JUMPS THE SNAKE RIVER CANYON

by Kelly Jones

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I was ten years old the summer I came to live with Grandma Grace and Uncle Buddy in Twin Falls. It was 1974, the town's population hovered around 20,000, and the fingers of urban commerce had yet to stretch out to the canyon rim, digging into the lava rock, erecting big box stores selling electronics and shoes and books. The warehouses, stacked with groceries two dozen feet high, and the restaurants, touting breathtaking views of the Snake River Canyon while offering menu selections with names like tartare, ceviche, and prosciutto, had yet to be built.

Yet, it was this very canyon, almost 500 feet deep, 1,600 feet across, that would bring fame to the little town that summer.

Mom and I had driven over from Portland with only the vaguest plan, but somehow I knew she'd be leaving without me. It was just the two of us, my dad having died fighting in the war in Viet Nam. I have no memory of him, though everyone says he looked a lot like my Uncle Michael.

Grandma Grace, a woman of fifty-something, with short cropped salt and pepper hair, possessed a let's-get-things-done attitude, and Uncle Buddy, according to Grandma, was content with getting nothing done at all. She harped on him constantly to get out and find a job or Uncle Sam would be knocking at his door. The draft had ended along with the U.S. involvement in the war that had taken my dad, so it was unlikely. I didn't know that at the time.

There were other things I didn't know—that a scandal called Watergate was winding down, that our President was on the verge of being impeached, that America, like my mom and me, and maybe Uncle Buddy, too, was in some kind of quandary as to where it was going.

These are the things I did know: my mom drank too much and she cried too much; we'd moved more times than I could count and I didn't have any friends; I was shorter than just about any other boy my age; the Idaho sun made my freckles pop out overnight (in Portland we'd had no more than a day of sunshine in the two and a half months we'd been there); my Grandma Grace was bossy and my Uncle Buddy, despite what Grandma Grace said, was just about the coolest person I'd ever known. He had dark hair like Elvis, pale blue eyes rimmed with long dark lashes, and rode a motorcycle that Grandma Grace said was going to kill him if the repossessor didn't come get it first. He bought it when he did have a job with a construction company, but he'd been fired for coming in late three days in a row, and I know for a fact that he was looking for a job because every day, after making us both a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and often fried potatoes, he left to go look for work.

"This bacon is made right here in Twin Falls from those famous Falls Brand pigs," he always told me as he placed several pieces, nice and crisp the way I liked them, on my plate. Everything in Twin Falls had some kind of reference to the falls, which was not really a twin falls at all. My mom took me down to the canyon and I was

disappointed because it was barely one falls, let alone two.

But then we left the canyon and drove a few miles back down the road, into the canyon again along a winding road and she showed me something I figured she must have been saving up—the roaring Shoshone Falls.

“Now, what do you think of that?” she’d asked proudly, as if she herself had something to do with this majestic scene.

“Totally cool,” I replied. The falls rumbled, thundered like a wild beast as we stood with several others, tourists I guessed, on a concrete fenced-in pad overlooking the falls. Though it was a long ways down, I felt the cool spray across my face. It felt so good, sounded so good, the roar of the water, the sheer power, that I wanted to stand there all day, being with my mom, the water cooling me on that scorching Idaho day. I stared down at the rugged lava rock cliffs, noticing bits of trash, but also coins tossed out as if into a wishing well to make a wish. They’d caught on the rocky ledge, not made it down to the water, and I wondered if that meant those wishes would be denied.

I was tempted to ask for a coin to make a wish. She hadn’t told me yet, but I sensed she’d be leaving soon, and I wanted to wish that she would stay or take me with her.

“Higher than Niagara Falls,” she said and then, “You want to go for a burger and Coke?”

We didn’t eat out much, even at the drive-in, so I knew this was a big treat, and I also guessed it was the last meal we’d share.

We drove back into town to the Arctic Circle, ordered burgers, fries with special sauce, and Cokes. We sat eating silently, both of us afraid to talk about what we knew was going to happen. Then she told me.

“I’m taking off tomorrow morning, early before you’re up. I’ve had a job offer in Seattle, a friend of your dad’s, a guy who served with him in Nam. His uncle works for a company that makes airplane parts and they need someone to help out in the office, and well ...” She didn’t cry, and neither did I, but we were both on the verge. I dipped a fry into the special sauce, which everybody knew was just ketchup and mayonnaise, though the drive-in wanted you to think it was some secret special recipe. I chewed on the fry and it tasted soggy and greasy, cold at that.

“When I’m settled, know for sure things will work out, get a place to live ... For now Grandma Grace will take care of you.” She smiled and I could tell the smile didn’t come easy. “Uncle Buddy can help out too, at least until he has a job.”

Somehow I was getting the feeling I came from a family of losers. Grandma Grace was the only one who had a real job, and the way Mom was talking it didn’t sound like hers was a for-sure thing either.

The next morning, she was gone. When I woke, I glanced over at the twin bed, a nightstand away from mine, where my mother had been sleeping during the time she’d been here with me, and it was empty, made up tidily as if no one had even slept there last night. A shaft of light fell through the blinds, creating a pattern on the white bedspread that made me think of prison bars.

I could hear Grandma Grace call from the kitchen. “Better get out here, unless

you want to eat a cold breakfast.”

I lay for a while, then got up and slipped on my pajama bottoms, actually cut-off bottoms that Grandma Grace had sewed for me. I was used to sleeping in my underwear, but she'd made me these pajamas—tops and bottoms, with sailboats on them. When I told Mom they were too hot she asked Grandma to cut them off, which she did in about a minute and hemmed them up so I had shorty pajamas, which were pretty girlish if it hadn't been for the sailboats against a blue background. The matching pajama top lay folded neatly in the top drawer of the dresser.

When I went into the kitchen, wearing my white, slept-in T-shirt and my sailboat pajama bottoms—a nice compromise so as not to hurt my grandmother's feelings—Grandma Grace was getting ready to take off for her job at the J. C. Penney store downtown, where she worked in the fabric and notions department, and Uncle Buddy was finishing up his bacon and eggs, scraping the yolk off the plate with a piece of toast. Grandma Grace always ate early, a bowl of bran cereal that smelled so bad I was happy to have that bacon smell to cover it up. For the past few days I had stayed in bed, waiting to smell that bacon, hoping when I got up Grandma Grace would be gone.

“You're up,” she said as I walked into the kitchen, wishing my mom was still there, yet knowing she was gone. The stern line of Grandma Grace's lips lifted in an almost smile as if she was happy to see me.

“I'm on my way out,” she said. “Put some of that lotion on your face, ChapStick on your lips.”

Instinctively, I reached up and ran my finger over my rough mouth. I hated that word *lips*, made me sound like a girl.

“It's in the second shelf in the bathroom,” she went on. The constant sage-scented breeze blowing into town from the desert left my skin as dry as dust and my lips chapped and blistered like a sunburned baby. Mom and I had been used to the moist, rainy northwest and in this Idaho desert we were constantly dry. Mom had been reminding me to get *moisturized* as she called it, and I guess this job had fallen on Grandma Grace now.

Buddy, who sat drinking coffee, looked over at me and made this motion like he was a girl putting on lipstick. He made a smack, smack sound.

Nobody said anything about my mom, and I wondered if they just didn't want to talk about her deserting me. She'd explained she'd be gone when I got up and I was sure she'd told them too, though we hadn't talked about that. It dawned on me that morning that maybe they didn't even want me here.

“Ride your bike downtown about noon, Pick,” Grandma Grace said, “and we can have hamburgers over at Crowley's.” She started down the hall toward her bedroom.

Two days in a row now, I thought, which put a new twist on this whole deal. Maybe everybody was feeling sorry for me and I'd get hamburgers and soda every day.

I stood for a moment, glancing around, and could hear Grandma Grace already coming back down the hall.

“Chore list for you on the counter,” she said as she stood in the doorway, sticking her arms through her sweater, adjusting her purse from one hand to the other as she did. I knew it would be much too hot for a sweater as the day progressed. Old ladies always

seemed to be cold around here, showing up for Sunday Mass with sweaters and jackets and all.

“On the counter,” she repeated with a wave of her now-sweatered arm, as if I hadn’t been listening. Then she turned back, her footsteps echoing through the hall. I heard the back door shut, then moments later the car revving up as the garage door jerked up, then slammed back down after she’d pulled out.

Buddy glanced over from the sink where he stood rinsing off his plate. “Left one for me too,” he whispered. “A note. GET A JOB.” His voice rose as if all the letters on his list were penned with caps.

I sat down at the table and Uncle Buddy slid a plate over in front of me with a flare and his usual offering of bacon, eggs, and toast. He poured me a glass of orange juice.

“Thanks,” I said, picking up a fork.

A few days ago, before she left, I’d heard my mom and Grandma talking about Buddy not being a very good role model for a boy who was certainly in need of one. “He’s got nothing but his dad,” Grandma Grace said, “and, if you haven’t noticed, the boy doesn’t talk about his dad, maybe because he doesn’t even remember him. A boy needs someone to relate to, someone who’s there, and Buddy ...”

“Buddy’s doing his best right now, Mom. The breakup with Marcie was hard. He’ll come around. Buddy always does. He’s suffering a broken heart right now.”

“He needs a job, something to occupy his time, earn some money,” Grandma Grace said without feeling. “Heaven knows he’s not out there looking, unless he’s looking in the bars ...”

“Needs time,” my mom said. “Sometimes it’s easier when they’re gone, but with Marcie—in a place the size of Twin, well, he’s bound to run into her.”

“He needs to make some money,” Grandma had come back coldly.

I stabbed into my eggs as Buddy took a final swig of his coffee, and then rinsed off his cup and stuck it in the drainer, then tossed me a smile and a wave. So I sat alone, poking at the two fried eggs that had already started to jell. They were cold, the yolks staring up at me like two bright yellow eyes. The bacon was cold too, but was still the best thing I’d eaten here in Idaho, best bacon I’d ever eaten anywhere. I loaded some homemade strawberry jam on the toast, and then when I finished I got up and made another piece. On the counter, next to the toaster, I spotted a paper that must have been Grandma’s list. I could see my name, PICK, spelled out in large letters that looked like it was written for a five-year-old. I didn’t bother to read it.

I heard the toilet in the half-bath in the hall flush, the back door slam, and then the roar of Buddy’s motorcycle. Sitting alone, I finished my breakfast, forcing down one of the eggs, dumping the other in the trash. I squirted some dish soap into the sink, ran hot water, scrubbed off my plate, rinsed, dried it, and put it back in the cupboard, then guzzled the rest of my orange juice, rinsed off my glass and put it away. Then I grabbed the note and read.

Clean up dishes was the first thing on the list, and I’d already done that. I wondered if I was supposed to do Buddy’s too. He’d rinsed off his plate and coffee cup,

put them in the drainer, but hadn't bothered to use any dish soap, or dry them off. I slipped them back into the sink, still filled with soapy water, cleaned them up, rinsed, then took the dishtowel, swiped it over the cup, then the plate, and put them away, then hung the towel on the bar under the sink.

The second item on the list: *make your bed*, then, *put dirty clothes in hamper*, *gather and take out the garbage*. (*Be sure to gather all trash: kitchen, baths, my bedroom, Uncle Buddy's, yours.*) *Get it out no later than 10:00. Garbage man comes between 10 and noon.*

Grandma Grace was one of these organized people, so different from my mom and Uncle Buddy. I wondered about my Grandpa Jack, who I barely remembered. I don't think he was the organized type either, and wondered if people were just made the way they were made from the beginning, if Grandma Grace's lists and sense of organization were something she was born with. Though I always thought things through, I didn't know yet if I was the list-making type like my grandma.

I went into my bedroom, which was really my mother's bedroom when she was growing up. The twin beds were covered with soft, white bedspreads, cute girl pillows in purples and pinks, which—when the beds were made, like my mom's was now—were thrown over the bed pillows that were rolled neatly then covered with the upper part of the bedspread. The dresser was also white, the curtains a frilly fabric with a pattern of butterflies in the colors and fabric of the pillows. My mom had added a few posters on the wall—bands popular when she was a teen—but I'd never heard of any of them. Somehow all this femininity stood as confirmation that this was temporary, that I wouldn't be here long. Though Mom's bed was made, I wondered again if she'd even slept in it, if she'd left right after she'd come in to tell me good night. I hadn't heard her come back in, or leave, and the fact that I'd slept so soundly when I knew she was leaving seemed a betrayal of sorts.

I made the bed, picked up the dirty jeans I'd thrown on the floor, my socks, and underwear and took them and threw them into the hamper in the laundry room. I wondered if eventually I'd be promoted to doing the laundry. I knew Grandma Grace was picky about that, and I didn't imagine she'd trust me to do it right.

I found a medium-size garbage bag in a box under the kitchen sink and started through the rooms gathering up the trash. I did the bathrooms first, then my mom's room, finding a couple of tissues with her lipstick on them, but that was all, as if that's all she'd left me.

Buddy's room was a big mess with books and magazines piled high, clothes strewn about the floor, an empty peanut can on the nightstand, a Butterfinger candy bar wrapper peeking out from under the bed. I looked at the books on the nightstand, reading the spines. Hemingway. Steinbeck. Faulkner. I wondered if I should gather up all this strewn garbage or just take what was in the trash can, which wasn't much other than a few gum wrappers. A couple of beer cans sat on the window ledge. Grandma Grace hated smoking, forbid it in the house, but I could tell from the smell of Buddy's room that he was smoking in here, and I guessed those beer cans were filled with old cigarette butts. I'd never seen Buddy smoke unless he was drinking beer. I'd seen him using one of

those cans as an ashtray out on the back patio a few days earlier, before my mom left. They were both drinking beer, talking in hushed voices that all but silenced when I went out to join them.

I dumped the gum wrappers in the garbage bag and left Buddy's room, went down the hall to Grandma Grace's room. Neat as a pin, other than a pile of fabric stacked on her sewing machine. Another stack of patterns from her store. I walked over and noticed an especially bright fabric, all blues and reds and yellows, amidst the pastel floral prints Grandma Grace favored for her own blouses and summer dresses. Darned if that overly bright fabric wasn't filled with baseballs, footballs, and soccer balls. Was she planning on sewing me another pair of pajamas? I stared at the fabric for several moments, then slowly, carefully I unfolded it and looked it over. A repeating pattern of balls from every sport imaginable, but in unrealistic colors. Blue footballs, white and green soccer balls, yellow baseballs. I glanced over at the mini chest where I knew she kept her needles and spools of thread. And sewing scissors. I opened the top drawer and didn't even have to rummage around to find the scissors. I slid my fingers into the two oval openings, surprised at how heavy it felt in my hand. Then, carefully, I started to snip, doubling the fabric over in the middle, cutting a big jagged square out of the center. Meticulously I refolded it, hiding the cutout, wondering if Grandma Grace really thought this was masculine, that a ten-year-old kid like me, a boy who'd never played a single sport in his life, would like it. I took the square of fabric and dumped it in the trash bag I'd been carrying around from room to room, and then I trudged back into the kitchen and added the egg shells and plastic bacon wrappers from that morning, along with several days of carrot peels, soggy lettuce and tomato tops.

I tied a knot in the top of the plastic bag and lugged it out the back door, not even bothering to put on my shoes, opened the gate out of the yard to the alley and lifted the metal lid off the old trash can that looked like it had been in the family for at least half a century. A strong whiff of leftover rotting trash jumped out at me, so I tossed the large trash bag in quick as I could and replaced the lid. A few pieces of dried up paper towel, maybe from earlier in the week, stuck to the outside of the trash can, so I pried them loose, lifted the lid a tad and poked them inside. Just as I replaced the lid a second time, WHACK.

Something hard had hit me in the head. I reached back and felt a wet patch on my scalp. I looked at my finger—blood—and realized someone had hit me with a rock. Quickly I reached down, grabbed a handful of stones and pebbles from the alley, feeling some gritty dirt tagging along, and positioned myself behind the large metal trash can. Another rock flew from across the alley, missing me by inches.

I could see a head peeking out from behind a trash can on the other side of the alley a couple of houses down, then another head.

“What the heck are you doing?” I yelled.

“What are you doing in our alley?” the biggest head yelled back as he lobbed another rock across the alley. It hit the trash can with a metallic ping.

“You're a lousy shot,” I hollered.

The little head was bobbing out to get a look, then back for protection, though I

had yet to throw a single rock.

“This isn’t your alley,” I snarled.

“Is so,” the big head yelled.

“Public alley,” I came back. “That city garbage truck will be barreling down this morning picking up trash—”

“You’re the trash,” the little head hollered and laughed. So did his big brother. They had to be brothers, I realized. They had identical flattop haircuts and piggy looking upturned noses.

“You look like a couple of pigs,” I yelled, throwing my words across the alley as if they were rocks, attempting to sharpen the edges to be as hurtful as possible.

“Wallowing around in the trash. Maybe this is your alley. Piggy trash alley.”

In my head, I heard my mom’s voice, “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never—”

“Danny,” a woman’s voice called. “Ricky.” She made her way through the backyard toward the alley, pocketbook in one hand, car keys dangling from the other. She stopped as she approached the two boys using the trash can as cover. Obviously their mother, as she had the same upturned nose.

“What’s going ...” She glanced over toward me. “Hi,” she said cautiously, then, “You must be Grace’s grandson.” Her voice was sweet and for a moment I thought she might come over and shake my hand. I cowered behind the trash can, having just realized I was still barefooted, wearing my shorty pajama cutoff bottoms with the sailboats, hoping the two boys hadn’t got a look at them before I jumped for cover.

“I heard you were coming to visit this summer,” the mother said. “We’ve been out of town this past week and a half. Not sure Grace told me ... what’s your name?”

“Pick,” I said, without thinking. It wasn’t really my name, but it was what everyone called me. My real name’s Michael. Michael Andrew Patterson. When I was a baby my Uncle Michael, my dad’s brother, had called me Pickle, I think maybe because it sounded sort of like Michael, and he figured he was already Michael and we needed another name for me. Somehow it stuck and had eventually been shortened to Pick. I’d heard all the jokes—*like, that mean you pick your nose, and eat your boogers?* Or, if I told them it was short for Pickle, *is your weenie a green pickle?* I was sure that Ricky would be saying something now if his sweet Momma hadn’t been standing right there. In my head, I was kicking myself for being so stupid. Nobody knew me here and I could make up a new name. I should have said my name was Mike.

“Well, welcome to the neighborhood, Pick,” Ricky and Danny’s mom said, “I’m Mrs. Edsen and you’ve met the boys. You’ll have to come over some time and play. We’re in a bit of a rush this morning,” she said tucking her pocketbook under her arm.

The two boys were standing now, not crouching like a couple cowards behind the trash can. The older stood, feet spread, hands on his hips. The younger, who I guessed to be about six or seven, nuzzled up to his mother. I noticed they were both wearing swimming trunks, the little boy now digging around trying to rearrange his privates.

“Well, boys, let’s go.” She turned, then glanced back at me over her shoulder. “We’re headed off to swimming lessons. You like to swim?”

I stood now, still behind the trash can, fist still clutching the rocks. I nodded, though I really wasn't much of a swimmer. But every kid likes to swim.

"Maybe you and the boys can go over to Harmon Park one of these afternoons." As if we were best buddies, as if her kids hadn't just split my head open with an alley rock. I reached back with my clean hand, the one that wasn't filled with alley rocks and dirt, and discovered it had already stopped bleeding.

"It's closed for lessons every morning," Mrs. Edsen added, as if she'd given this more thought, "but opens in the afternoon for everyone. How about you going over with the boys sometime?"

She didn't wait for my answer, but I thought maybe I'd ask Buddy or Grandma Grace about swimming at Harmon Park. With my mom gone and no friends, I needed something to do.

I pattered around the rest of the morning, watched a bit of TV. There was nothing good, just soap operas, and they only got one channel. Just before noon I changed into my jeans and buttoned cotton shirt, went out to the storage shed attached to the garage and hopped on my bike, which stood next to my mom's. The bike I'd been riding since I got to Twin Falls was really an old bike Buddy had years ago. He'd fixed it up with new tires and a new seat. I rode the six blocks to downtown, passing the library and City Park with its tiny, round wading pool, which actually looked pretty good since the air was starting to warm. I wished I would have remembered to put on that ChapStick because I could already feel my lips splitting and cracking. When I got downtown I leaned the bike up against the J. C. Penney store and went in and over to the fabric section. I didn't see Grandma Grace, so I asked the lady at the cash register.

"Oh, you must be Pick," she said, reminding me that this would have to be my name here in Twin Falls. I'd change it to Mike when I went to live with my mom in Seattle. This was such a stupid town anyway. Full of a bunch of hicks, I thought, and had to laugh as a cluster of nonsense words made a rhyme in my head. Hicks. Pricks. Dicks. The realization that my name, Pick, was a good rhyme, too, slipped right in, lining up with all those words, reminding me why people always made fun of me.

Just then Grandma Grace came out of the back room, her purse swung over her shoulder. "We're headed to Crowley's to grab some burgers," she told the lady at the register, who smiled as if we were off on a great adventure. "Might take a little extra time today."

I left my bike at the store and we walked the half block down to Crowley's. It was really a drug store with a soda fountain bar in the back, and in all honesty they did have great burgers. We'd already ridden our bikes down once to have lunch with Grandma Grace when Mom was here. The burgers were twice the size of those from the Arctic Circle, and the fries were hand cut, made—according to the little ditty running across the menu—from real Idaho potatoes.

"Hi there, Grace," the woman behind the counter greeted us as we sat down on the round swivel stools at the counter.

"Afternoon, Marcene. This is my grandson, Pick," she introduced me. "Pick, this is Mrs. Hacking."

“Visiting your grandma this summer?” she asked with a smile.

“Just visiting, yep,” I said.

We put in our order. I asked Grandma Grace if I could get a chocolate milkshake and she said sure. We sat and watched as Mrs. Hacking poured in the ingredients: milk, vanilla ice cream, chocolate syrup, and spun it around in the noisy milkshake maker.

A couple of men in business suits and ties came in and sat at the other end of the bar.

“Six million dollars, that’s what he’s getting,” one of them said. “Can you believe that?” He shook his head in disbelief. “And that’s just the upfront money. Arum says they’ll be pulling in more than that when it’s all said and done.”

“Could be a real financial boon for the community,” the other said as he picked up a menu. “Got any of that chicken salad today, Marcene?”

“Just whipped some up. How about you?” she said, shooting a grin toward the other businessman. “Take your regular cheeseburger today?”

“You got it, Marcene,” he replied, then turned to his companion. “It’s sure going to put us on the map. I hear they paid Tim Qualls \$35,000 just to lease the land.”

Another man, this one in an open collar shirt and a shiny forehead, walked up to the counter. “Could bring in a bunch of riffraff, too,” he said, sliding into the conversation as easily as he slid onto the barstool. “They plan on selling 200,000 tickets.”

“That’s a joke,” one of the men said. “That’d increase the city population by a good ten times for the weekend. Not going to happen.”

“Might have to prepare for it. Sheriff Corder’s talking about pulling in the State Police,” one of them added with concern.

“National Guard’s more likely,” the third man chimed in.

I could see Grandma Grace shaking her head, but she didn’t join in the conversation. “Get your chores done?” she asked me.

“Yep,” I said.

“Good.” She gave me a pat on the head. I flinched when she touched the spot where I’d been hit by the alley rock.

“What’s wrong with your head?”

“Bumped it on the kitchen cupboard when I was cleaning up,” I lied.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment and then she said, “Maybe we could set you up on an allowance.”

“I don’t plan on staying long, so don’t set me up on a salary or anything,” I came back and she emitted a little laugh out of the corner of her mouth.

Mrs. Hacking poured our milkshakes out of the big stainless steel milkshake maker into two tall fancy glasses, spooned on a bit of whipped cream, put a cherry on top of each, jabbed in a straw and spoon, set one in front of me and the other in front of Grandma Grace.

The straws stood stiff as smokestacks, and I could see right away the shakes were too thick to slurp through a tiny hole. I popped the cherry in my mouth, discarded the stem in the ashtray, then chased the sweetness down with an enormous spoonful of

milkshake. The cold, smooth texture felt good as it passed over my dry mouth, and the whipped cream and chocolate tasted like magic as they touched my tongue and slid down my throat.

“Did you see that footage on Wide World of Sports?” one of the businessmen said. “The fella’s an idiot. Broken every bone in his body, as I hear. Was in a coma for a month after that jump at Caesar’s.”

“With a pocketful of money,” his friend added.

“I hear he has his own bank vault in Butte,” the newcomer joined in. “Walks around with a gold-encrusted, diamond-studded cane.”

“Well, let’s stuff some of that money in our pockets, too,” the first one said.

All three of the men laughed, as Mrs. Hacking delivered our fries and cheeseburgers.

“Do you know about Harmon Park?” I asked Grandma Grace. I removed the onion and tomato from my burger and shoved them over to the edge of my plate. I kept the lettuce, rearranged the pickles, grabbed the bright yellow plastic bottle on the counter and squirted some mustard on my patty in a pattern of concentric circles. “I hear they have a swimming pool.” I slapped the top bun back on and took an enormous bite.

She nodded, but I could see in her eyes she was wondering where this came from. “Buddy tell you he’d take you over there to the pool?”

I swallowed before answering, remembering Grandma Grace’s admonition about talking with your mouth full. “I heard some kids in the alley when I took out the trash.”

“The Edsen kids? Ricky and Danny?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You meeting some friends?”

Friends wouldn’t pelt you with rocks, I thought, but instead I asked, “Think I might go swimming?”

“Well, now,” Grandma Grace said thoughtfully, “if you keep doing your chores, I think we could work something out.”