

ALWAYS, ALWAYS

I was lonely. My dad had gone away, and they had said some words to me about that. I guess the words made sense to them, but not to me...my dad was just gone. I was more than lonely in those days and I know that now. Back then I was a lonely boy sitting on the steps of an ancient, unfamiliar brownstone in the middle of a huge, stinking city. That's all.

For many days I watched Freddy come down the street, the elm trees casting curious patterns of light and shadow across his face. His face worked, as if in deep concentration, trying to fathom things so far beyond him.

"Hi," I said to him as he climbed the steps, his face working. He gave me a short look, without curiosity, and passed silently by me. It wasn't uncommon among these people to do so. They didn't seem very friendly.

We had the upstairs of my grandparents' old brownstone. Freddy lived with a mob of siblings and his parents on the first floor. It was just my mother and me upstairs. My grandparents lived between, but I didn't see much of them.

As the door to Freddy's apartment opened, a draft of noise would pour over me, and then was gone, choked off by the door's slam behind Freddy.

I sat and watched Freddy come down that street for two weeks; watched the shadows and his face and said “Hi” to his silence. Then one day he sat down beside me. I had a friend. But what do you say to people who don’t talk? I couldn’t figure out where all the noise in Freddy’s apartment came from. Finally, he got up and went inside. Why not. I could smell his dinner cooking. It was a lot more interesting than I was.

He came the next day and sat beside me again. In the dirt that served as a front yard in Stinking City, I had found a nail left over from some old repair work. I was digging at a pit in the step—those steps that looked for the world like gravestones laid over on their sides—trying to crumble the granite away. Freddy sat wordlessly watching me. He left and I dug more furiously. I was making some progress.

But he came back and, hesitating a bit, handed me his baseball and mitt to inspect. The mitt was not well-oiled like mine. I suppose when there are that many kids in a family you don’t have a well-oiled mitt.

My dad had taken good care of mine. He had oiled it and carefully massaged the oil into the leather until it shone. Then he had tied a baseball into the pocket and set it behind the stove to cure in the warmth there. It was about the best mitt anybody ever had.

I handed Freddy back his mitt and, standing up, shoved the nail deep into my pocket. It felt good to throw a ball. Freddy dashed and skittered after the ball like a little kid. When he threw the ball back, all out of breath from chasing it down, his elbow stuck out funny.

One day Freddy stood on the sidewalk looking up at me sitting on the step. “Want to go to the park?” He smiled and I could see the crooked rows of teeth.

He led me through the streets to the park. It was a long way and I had never been there. Without Freddy along I probably wouldn’t have wanted to go.

He ran toward the swings, I guess I’d never seen Freddy so happy. He turned toward me as he ran, “Will you push me? Hardly anyone ever will.” I got behind and I pushed him as high and as fast as I could until it was nearly dark. He laughed and he shouted with glee. Had it been dark enough, I might have smiled. Then we went home to our own ways.

Always, always I had my nail and dug at the pit in the step, determined to finish what I had begun. Freddy came to sit beside me many times. He watched as I worked and I appreciated the company.

One day he stood hesitating before he sat down, and I looked up to see why. He had on the shy smile that played across his face now and again. With great ceremony he dug into his pocket and produced a nail of his own. I made room for

him beside me on the step, and we set to work together. Freddy seemed to understand; I appreciated that too.

Freddy stretched out in the sun to do his digging. I seemed to need to stay in a tight little ball, wrapped around myself for protection. He stretched out, feet on the sidewalk, hand wrapped halfway around his hole to help improve his aim. He set to digging with energy and purpose, but his hand got in the way.

“Freddy,” I gasped as I watched. Freddy couldn’t seem to stop himself. It was like slow motion. The nail bit into the skin of his finger. It ripped and tore on down as Freddy and I watched. Like an explosion, the wound’s sides flew open and spread out. We sucked in our breath as the pink tissue and the pale skin mingled together in a montage of confusion.

The deepest flesh turned a warning dark as the first blood burst from the tiny capillaries, minute specks hanging from the sides of the gash like tiny colored tears that grew to the size of droplets. They grew and fell, the ugliness was finally submerged. The dark blood rose to flow out over Freddy’s hand as the nail continued its disastrous course toward the end of his finger. It’s easy to see why a thing like that can hurt so much. I was mesmerized.

Freddy finally dropped the nail and capped off the wound with his free hand. I grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him through his front door.

He found his sister and, puffing with dread, uncovered the wound.

“He did it with a nail,” I volunteered.

“Oh, Freddy.” His sister was about my age. Pretty. Freddy was a head taller than she was.

She took his hand in hers and looked the cut over carefully. It made me feel better.

“Come on, Freddy, let’s wrap it up.” She led him to the cupboard and I disappeared.

Each day it got a little easier to leave the step. Freddy and I spent hours at the park. Freddy was happiest there and I didn’t mind. We played catch and Freddy got better. He couldn’t catch but he didn’t look so funny throwing. We even spent some time digging at the pit I had started in the step. Mostly, I took care of that when Freddy wasn’t around; he really didn’t like it very much anymore.

The days seemed a little warmer and sunnier...a little. There seemed to be a little more to my life now than light and dark...a little more, maybe.

Freddy helped the days work their way toward the end of the season. And then one day it was as if some wheel in the universe had turned. I found myself

waiting for Freddy instead of my dad. In 1944 no one's dad ever came home anyway. I really did know that. I was just kind of playing a game.

Freddy caught the ball twice. I clapped him on the back buddy-fashion as he beamed with pride. A group of kids back from holiday was beginning to gather. Freddy looked at them and the smile began to fade. He started edging toward the steps.

I looked at him and I looked at them. There was something going on, and then it began.

“Fred, Fred wet the bed.

Got something wrong in his head.”

Soft at first. I could hardly understand the words. But then more of them chanting, louder and louder. Over and over.

The window of Freddy's apartment flew open; his mother stuck her head out and started yelling at him.

“Freddy, you get in here. Right now.” Emphasis on ‘now.’ It was like a bomb had shattered that peaceful afternoon.

I looked at Freddy and he looked back at me.

“No, I never,” he said with quiet fierceness as he backed away from me up the steps.

In 1952 Freddy choked to death. And as my life turns full circle I see in my mind another face, my son Dan, coming down a broader, younger street. A face working in a curious, all-too-familiar way...the son, born to my middle years.

I watch him coming down the street, the elm trees casting those same patterns of light and shadow across his face, and I search the street again. Always, always looking for the boy who will be my son's friend. That lucky boy.

I'm eighty-four now and time has decreed that I shall spend the rest of my life alone. I have thought of my son so often, but I no longer remember if that boy ever came.