

Chapter I

Fate is a series of coincidences imposed on one by God.

-Unknown

Heat devils danced off the blacktop against a backdrop of towering white clouds as the car sped down the highway through miles and miles of corn, wheat, and hay. Four-year-old Joshua dozed as Clara smiled watching her son sleep. Wind tousled his fine hair in the golden light of another Iowa afternoon on the way to see his grandmother. He looked forward to his monthly visits and Clara knew that Josh helped her mother cope with the stroke that left one arm limp and her speech slurred. Clara brought her down from Chicago after her father died, but her health immediately deteriorated. Even with the hard times between Clara and her mother, she liked being around her only grandchild. And, Josh was the only person who could understand what her mother wanted. Somehow, the two had a connection that seemed to go beyond conversation.

They arrived in the early afternoon and entered the home where octogenarians wandered slowly back and forth across the lobby in an endless dance. They waited and longed for the appearance of old friends who never came. The nursing home was full of conflicting smells; the sterile smell of ammonia used to scrub floors mixed with the stomach-turning stench of someone's partially digested lunch or someone's unwashed linen. The smells competed against each other, rolling through the halls turning heads and watering eyes of everyone who entered. Josh tried to hold his breath against the assault, but within a few minutes, his nose adapted to the noxious scents his mother never seemed to notice.

They headed down a long hallway dulled by the swabbing of the nighttime janitor and ruttled by the constant race of rubber wheels. Several residents lined the halls and seemed to show a keen interest in the young boy. Most smiled or even reached out to him as he walked by. But as Josh passed one old man, he sneered and muttered, "You're not going to take me!"

Clara shot a worried glance at the nurse's aid lounging behind the desk who looked up and nonchalantly said, "Oh, don't worry. He always says that."

Zigzagging down the hall, Josh glimpsed scenes of people's former lives. Pictures of unseen relatives and knickknacks taken from homes existing only as memories now lined small shelves next to each window. Josh wondered about the faces, thin-skinned with muscle clinging to brittle bone worn from years of use. Their stick-like arms groped from beneath sheets that seemed to smother their fragile bodies. Reaching out to him for a touch of comfort, they longed to have some of what Josh had, youth. To Josh, this world moved in slow motion, heads down, trudging through the most basic tasks, not really alive.

When he and Clara finally arrived at his grandmother's room, she was asleep, quiet and still in the small but clean abode. Clara went to the nurse's station to ask about her condition as Josh trailed closely behind.

He fought restlessness shifting nervously from foot to foot while gazing at the wheelchairs lined up against the far wall. Josh thought about taking a ride, but something else caught his attention. He heard an almost inaudible moan from down the hall. His mother talked to a white-haired nurse whose heavily starched, old-fashioned cap perched atop her head seeming to defy gravity. The nurse glanced at him as she spoke to his mother. No one but Josh, however, seemed to hear the moaning.

He wanted to hide in his mother's pastel skirt, but the sound attracted him, pulling his little body down the hall. Josh walked slowly staring warily back at his mother waiting for her to stop him as the moaning grew louder beckoning him past one, two, three rooms.

Outside the last room before the corner, Josh heard labored breathing and the source of the mournful sound. He strained his ears hearing another airy and strained moan coming from old tattered, bellows of lungs. He shifted to hear more from inside the mysterious room causing his shoe to squeak. Suddenly, a voice crackled as if from an old speaker, "Who's there? Esther? Please ask the nurse for some more pain killers."

The voice became a bit more frantic and shrill.

"Esther! Please help me!"

Josh was afraid to peek around the frame of the door for fear of a scolding. Looking ever so slowly around the edge of the door, he bent his small body at the waist like an actor taking a bow. A look of surprise and relief passed over the old woman's face furrowed by her wrenching pain.

The woman, a beauty in her youth, had high cheekbones and a striking face that now sagged to one side as if gravity were somehow greater near the opposite wall. The woman opened and closed her mouth to the rhythm of oxygen being fed to her nose. Her back, molded into the hospital bed, was curved by years of disease and suffering making movement difficult at best. Her hands looked like his grandmother's, but with one difference. They curved tightly upward and inward with bony, crooked fingers, claw-like in appearance and shook lightly with a life of their own. Her eyes were bright and dark underneath a long mane of flowing white hair that, by its appearance, was her pride and joy. Slowly raising a shaky hand toward the handsome young lad occupying her doorway, she winced as pain shot down her neck and arm.

"Please come here for a moment," she said with a firm voice.

She struggled to keep her arm aloft beckoning him forward with a continual wave of her quivering hand. Josh, pushed from behind by an unperceived force, doggedly approached the woman. A surge of fear rose inside him as he felt his own arm rise to meet the frail old woman's touch. As their fingers met, a blue glow passed between their skin.

The woman felt a strange sense of familiarity like passing a stranger in a crowd and then realizing that the endless march of time had changed a friend. The pain that for years chained her to a bed passed away. Her shaking hands quieted as the boy drew closer and a calm not known since she was a child settled over her. She looked upon the little angel standing quiet and full of innocence at the side of the bed and knew he was there to help. Her eyes went wide when the little sandy-haired boy smiled and asked, "You've been here a long time, haven't you?"

She was frightened for only the briefest moment and then her mind relaxed as the little boy stroked her hand. There was absolutely no pain, no fear, and no dread.

Josh heard himself say words he didn't think and saw his hand rub the thin, transparent skin that glowed a subtle blue under his gentle touch. A low chirping sound came from a machine next to the bed that looked something like a little robot he had at home. He was unafraid, somehow understanding the suffering and pain of the delicate old woman.

"My grandma's hands hurt, too," he said slowly watching the woman open her mouth to speak. "You can sleep if you want to."

The woman smiled and lowered her hand. With her gaze fixed on Josh's face, she slowly closed and opened her eyes a couple of times as if to thank him for the relief. She then drifted lightly to sleep with no pain, no fear, and a slightly crooked smile. Life ebbed slowly away to some other creature, to some other thing, or to somewhere else while Josh stood watching the woman's spirit pass beyond.

The chirping slowed, almost disappearing until suddenly a loud whine came out of the robot. The little animated creature's eyes blinked frantically beckoning frenzied footsteps and shouting from the hall. A nurse rushed into the room slowing only to glance at Josh and then grabbed the old woman's wrist. She then placed a stethoscope on her chest as two other nurses rushed by Josh standing quietly watching the scene. One of the attendants was the tall stern-looking nurse.

He heard his mother's voice call coming closer, "Josh, where are you?"

She entered the room and bent down at his side while the nurses attempted to bring the old woman back to life.

"Mommy, she was very tired and wanted to sleep," Josh said pointing back toward the old woman.

Clara looked confused over at the small body in the bed. What was Josh telling her? "Honey, did she say anything to you before she went to sleep?"

Fear rose in Josh's chest hearing an edge to his mother's voice and seeing her face turn ghostly white. Worried wrinkles streamed across her forehead as she tried to comprehend what happened in the room.

"She was in pain and didn't want to hurt anymore," he said looking up at the adults towering over him.

The room was very quiet. There were no quick orders, no sounds, and no voices discussing how to revive the woman. She was covered with her bed sheets and the three nurses stood glaring down at Josh and his mother.

"Did you touch anything?" a young nurse asked gently bending down to him.

Josh realized for the first time that he might have done something wrong. As he cowered into his mother's side, the stern nurse reached down and turned his head upward pinching his chin with her long bony fingers

forcing him to look straight into her cloudy eyes. "Why were you in here, young man?" she demanded.

Josh pulled his chin away as his mother straightened to confront the nurse.

"My son didn't do anything! Leave him alone!" she said grabbing his small hand and turning toward the door.

They walked quickly out of the room and down the hall toward the exit, followed by the nurses calling after them. Clara suspected Josh had seen or heard something in that room. He was too calm about the death of the old woman, saying over and over, "She was in pain, Mom. She was in pain."

Clara rushed frantically toward the exit squeezing Josh's hand until he whimpered. She relaxed her grip and raced him out the front door of the facility to their car.

As Clara pulled the car out of the parking lot, the spinning tires threw gravel in their wake. She breathed a sigh of relief, reached over, and buckled the belt around Josh and then herself before getting onto the two lane highway.

Rolling hills laden with late summer grain engulfed the road ahead carrying them toward town. The golden shafts of wheat flowed in the breeze like ocean waves endless in tranquility contrasting sharply with Clara's mood. Though she knew that Josh had done nothing wrong, her mind was full of questions. Why had he wandered off? Why did he know about that woman's pain? He said she wanted to sleep. What did that mean? He probably heard the last words she spoke.

Clara wanted to lash out at him. But instead, she smiled as Josh rested his head against the maroon fabric of the door panel and sang a song from Sesame Street oblivious to his mother's anger and confusion. He knew the old woman had died, but was glad she was out of pain. Josh, happy to be going home, cared only about seeing his dad.

Clara turned after a long silence and asked, "Josh, do you know that the old woman died back there?"

Part of her hoped he would not understand.

"Yes, Mom," he said running a toy car over his leg while making noises. "She went to sleep. She'd been there a very long time."

"How do you know she was there a long time?" Clara asked over the 'varoom' sounds coming from her son.

"I don't know," Josh said. He then cocked his head to one side with a thoughtful look on his face. Josh concentrated on his mother's eyes he asked, "Why do people stay in that place to die?"

She dreaded his insightful questions, always hitting the nail on the head.

"Josh, why do you think that?" Clara asked

"Every time we see Grandma, I hear the nurse tell you that someone else died last night," he said. "Old people go there to die."

Josh with his innocent questions and statements was right. She felt guilty that her own mother was in that awful place and resolved to bring her home no matter how Tim felt. Clara would not let her rot away in that home. Besides, her mother was always so playful when Josh was around, seeming to brighten and gain strength the moment she saw him.

So, what if Josh had wandered into the old woman's room? So, what if she died at that moment? Clara thought. So, what if Josh seemed perfectly comfortable thinking that the woman had gone to sleep.

A nagging thought in the back of her mind told Clara that Josh understood completely what had happened and somehow knew more. He always knew more and Clara was fearful that her little boy was very different from other children. Everything Josh did only confirmed her suspicions that he was a very special little boy.

Clara was calmer now as she drove towards home putting the clamber of their visit to the nursing home out of her mind. The diminishing light of day brought out an even deeper golden color from the fields as the wind's endless rhythm traveled across the great expanse. She looked down at Josh and smiled as he nodded off to sleep ten minutes before they returned home, as always.

Chapter II

“And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.”

-Zechariah 12:10

Plink. Plink. The tin can rocked sideways as another pellet struck its side. Three older boys took turns firing the pellet gun at ever-increasing distance while Josh stood behind them waiting in anticipation for a turn that would never come. Now five, Josh was too small to fire the pellet gun, let alone tag along with boys three or four years older than he.

Nick aimed the rifle and pretended the can was an enemy soldier attacking. Plink.

"Hey, nice shot," Josh said as the pellet bounced off the side of the can. "Can I have a turn now?"

Nick turned to him and said, "I could get in trouble with your dad if I let you take a shot."

Nick raised the gun and took another shot. The pellet whizzed past the can disturbing two crows sitting on a barbed wire fence in the pasture behind Josh's house.

"No, he wouldn't!" Josh pleaded.

"Come on, Nick. Let him shoot it," Ricky said impatiently.

Ricky had a dirty face, uncombed hair, and clothes with holes in them. He was one of those kids that seemed to have a hard time getting along in life. His parents didn't pay much attention to what he did with his time, let alone what trouble he got into. Ricky was caught stealing candy from Hale's Corner Market on more than one occasion and each time Mr. Hale called his parents to come get him. One time, Ricky's dad showed up and grabbed his hair so hard that tufts of hair tore right off his head. Mr. Hale asked that he never return.

Ricky was mean, and rumors abounded about his like of torturing or killing animals. No one thought this surprising, considering the treatment he received from his father. Bruises were always present on his limbs, and a couple times each month, Josh noticed dried blood around Ricky's nose. Nick asked him about the blood once, and Ricky told him if he asked again, he would punch him out.

Nick, on the other hand, was a big, gentle giant incapable of harming anyone. Josh didn't understand why Nick hung out with Ricky. They had only one common interest, baseball. They loved to play catch and to hit the ball many times into the evening's waning light.

Nick lowered the rifle exclaiming, "Just missed!"

"Yeah right, fatso!" Ricky sneered. "Give Joshy a shot."

"Rick, you know that he's too little," Nick said.

He looked out for Josh treating him like a little brother. Nick was big for his age with short brown hair in a bowl cut and a pudgy face that broadened into a smile when he saw Josh. When he first moved to town, Josh was the only one who talked to him. Nick looked huge to most of the neighborhood kids, but was always kind and gentle to everyone around him. They made quite the pair, a precocious five-year-old and a gentle giant walking down the street. Over time, other kids in the neighborhood became friends with Nick. He looked out for everyone including the third member of the trio, Kevin.

Kevin was quiet and not much bigger than Josh. His small size, bright red hair, and whitewashed skin with freckles caused people to stare at him. He also had asthma, which kept him from running or climbing trees like the other kids in the neighborhood. He seemed not to trust Josh and teased him unmercifully. When he wasn't mocking him, Kevin watched Josh very carefully quietly tagging along behind the two older boys while Josh tagged along behind him.

For over two hours, the boys plinked away at the old tin can found in the muck of the pond scum. They were getting pretty good, too. But, as the afternoon wore on, Ricky became more brazen and started shooting at trees and the pond. He even took a few pot shots at a horse across the pasture. The horse seemed unaware of what was going on outside his grassy haven continuing to munch on dried grass. Ricky took another shot, but the gun was empty.

"Damn it!" he said. "Give me the shot, Kevin!"

"You shouldn't hurt the horse," Josh said stepping toward Ricky.

Ricky smiled and shouted, "Give me the goddamn shot, Kevin!"

Kevin fumbled in his pants for the tube of pellets and gave them to the older boy. Ricky loaded the gun and turned his attention to a group of sparrows flitting in and out of the poplar trees. Ricky took a few wild shots, missing the tree and the birds until he focused on a tiny sparrow sitting on a lower limb grooming itself. After he fired the gun, Ricky yelled, "All right, I got it!"

The bird fell from the tree coming to rest in the mossy grass below.

The boys scrambled to the bird lying motionless beneath the tree. As they stared straight down at the tiny brown creature with its eyes still open, Kevin's labored breathing kept time with all their hearts, beating fast with adrenaline.

"Is it alive?" Nick asked, fear evident in his voice.

"It looks dead," Kevin struggled.

Josh stood very still looking upon the tiny mound of feathers. Disbelief rushed through his mind while Ricky walked back and forth behind the other boys, agitated and anxiously looking at the dead bird.

"Come on, let's go!" he said stopping to rub the back of his neck.

Ricky remembered how his father had killed his dog a year earlier punishing him for stealing. He wanted nothing to do with the dead bird.

"Ricky, why'd you have to shoot it?" Nick yelled at him.

"It's just a bird! What do you care if I killed it?" Ricky said sarcastically.

Nick turned to face Ricky standing chest to chest with the smaller but wiry boy. Josh felt a rage well up inside him like he had never known. He spun on his heels and rushed headlong toward Ricky who sidestepped him, grabbed his shoulder, and threw him to the ground. Josh landed face down in thistle and felt the painful stab of small barbs entering his hands and cheek.

As Ricky stood over him laughing, Josh saw the sparrow lying lifeless in the weeds. He raised his head to look at Ricky just as a fist slashed across the older boy's face. In slow motion, Ricky fell to the ground. Nick stood over him, blood covering his knuckles.

"No one ever hits Josh! You understand me?" Nick yelled towering over Ricky holding his bloody nose.

Kevin jumped between the two boys and grabbed Nick around the waist struggling to keep the larger boy from hitting Ricky again. "Come on Nick!" Kevin gasped trying to hold him.

Ricky cowered on the ground crying and curling up in a tight ball as Josh crawled slowly over to the small bird looking for a flicker of life in the tiny creature. He touched the sparrow's wing and felt the soft feathers beneath his fingertips. A thin string of blue electricity coming from under Josh's palm shot from his hand to the bird's chest. Josh picked up the bird and cradled its tiny body in his equally small hand.

Shadows cast by the poplar trees danced on Josh's face and the world seemed to stop as he stroked the sparrow with his fingers. The noise of the pond, the wind in the trees, and the rustle of insects in the tall grass infected his head. Josh sensed closeness to the bird and the natural forces around him. The older boys finally noticed him sitting on both knees stroking the small bird while slowly rocking back and forth.

Stillness settled over the modest gathering as a light breeze ruffled Josh's hair and then blew gently through the bird's brown feathers igniting a spark of something inside. Almost instantaneously, the sparrow's claws clenched. Its head suddenly turned and the eyes looked deep into Josh's as if to say thank you. The sparrow rolled in his hand as Josh felt the heartbeat, almost imperceptible against the background of his own racing pulse. The rhythm was initially sporadic with a jarring convulsion every now and then that jerked the tiny bird from side to side. The beat sped up to match Josh's own heart and then raced faster until it was a hum in his hand. With a blur of motion, the sparrow leapt out Josh's hand, landed on the soft earth, and looked back before flicking its wings and flying beyond the line of poplars into the setting sun.

The older boys, wide-eyed and confused, looked at their small companion with his head bowed. Ricky got to his feet and brushed himself off.

"I gotta go," he said quickly.

Nick and Kevin barely noticed as Ricky stumbled past them with a look of fear toward the small boy crouched on the ground. He ducked around Josh's house, stopped, and then turned to look one last time before heading home. The other two boys were stuck in a trance watching Josh rock slowly

back and forth with his hands clenched across his chest and his knuckles turning white against his arms.

Nick stepped cautiously toward him, bending down to touch his shoulder. Josh trembled under his hand and turned his head skyward to meet Nick's gaze. The older boy stared at him in the most peculiar way his head bent to one side with his mouth wide open, unhinged like the open tailgate on his dad's truck. In the back of his friend's eyes, Josh saw something. Nick's eyes held a look of awe.

Josh's motion slowed to an imperceptible oscillation. He felt no sadness, no remorse, and no happiness for the little bird as his mind and body returned to normal. His senses came back to life hearing Kevin's heavy breathing for the first time. The world also sped back to normal as Nick removed his hand and Josh got to his feet.

Nick stepped back next to Kevin who stared straight ahead trying to avoid Josh's eyes gulping fish-like mouthfuls of the heavy, late afternoon air. None of the boys spoke about what they witnessed. Only the sound of pounding hooves sounded above the wind as the horse headed toward his master holding a bucket of oats across the pasture.

"Was it dead?" Kevin finally gasped.

"I don't know," Josh said kicking the dirt at his feet afraid to look up at Kevin.

Nick looked down and took Josh's chin in his meaty hand. He tipped Josh's head upward.

"Josh, what happened? What did you do?"

"I just picked him up and held him," Josh stated firmly. "Why did Ricky have to shoot him?"

"That bird was dead!" Kevin burst out.

He was suddenly confident, his shoulders square and his back stiff, certain that Josh had brought the sparrow back to life.

"Come on, Kevin! Josh didn't do anything," Nick stated, his voice betraying his true feelings. "He just held the bird until it woke up."

Nick's mind raced as he tried to explain to himself what happened. Had Josh brought the little bird back to life? Maybe by stroking the bird's body? Nick didn't want to believe what his eyes told him.

Kevin glared at Josh, jabbing a finger in the small boy's face and saying loudly, "You stay away from me! What are you, some kind of witch?"

He glanced up at Nick, took an unsteady breath, and walked quickly through the trees past Josh's house.

The two boys spent the rest of the afternoon throwing rocks into the pond, neither talking nor looking at each other. They watched as the fading light called a couple of small fish to the surface to feed on water skippers and gadflies. Nick stared straight ahead afraid to look at his small friend standing ankle deep in the brackish mud. He wasn't afraid of Josh, but he couldn't rationalize how he felt about the bird.

"Josh! It's time to come home for dinner!" his mom yelled from the back porch.

The crickets and frogs rang in the night as the sun sank behind the hills rolling into the pastureland beyond Josh's house. Nick kicked the can now dented by repeated impacts and looked over at Josh staring off into the trees.

"I don't think we should tell anybody about this," Nick said.

Josh didn't say a word as Nick turned away from him and walked slowly away with his head hung low leaving Josh alone with his thoughts. Looking into the poplar trees where sparrows jetted in and out of the limbs, Josh smiled believing one of those birds was his small friend. There was frenzy in the motion of the birds and insects with the setting sun as everything great and small scurried to prepare for the coming night. Josh knew that he was somehow interconnected with the world and the tumult around him. He turned and trotted back to his house. He climbed the back stairs to his house and went into the kitchen.

At dinner Josh said nothing about the bird. Instead he listened intently as his dad described his new project downtown. His grandmother ate slowly, watching her young grandson, sensing that something had changed in him. Josh avoided her gaze, pretending she wasn't there.

He finished eating and took his plate to the counter. Josh started upstairs when suddenly his grandmother grabbed his arm with surprising strength. She pulled him near and whispered in a slurred voice, "I know something's wrong."

Josh shook his head and pulled away from her running upstairs as Clara and Tim watched the exchange with amazement. Clara's mother had never laid a hand on Josh before.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Clara asked.

Her mother nodded, got up from the table, and pushed her walker slowly into her room.

"I wonder what that was all about," Tim said leaning back into his chair. Josh was getting his pajamas on when Clara walked into his room.

"Josh, what did Grandma say to you?" she asked helping him with his shirt.

"Nothing," he lied.

"You sure?" Clara asked as she tucked him beneath the covers.

"Yup," Josh said smiling.

Clara kissed him on the cheek and said, "Have sweet dreams!"

"Thanks, Mom," Josh answered. "You, too!"

Tim walked in and said, "You ready for bed, squirt?"

Josh nodded.

Tim bent down, kissed his son on the brow, and said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night, Mom and Dad," Josh said rolling over to face the wall. His parents turned off the light and walked out of the room not knowing the inner demons that haunted him. Josh lay thinking about his grandmother knowing he couldn't hide anything from her. He decided to speak with her in the morning about the bird.

He watched the shadows play against his ceiling, indescribable figures dancing overhead. His eyelids flickered as sleep overtook his interest in the night creatures. He finally slept dreaming of a gray room with walls just out of focus or out of sight and a table right in the center.

On the table at which Josh sat was a brightly colored toy airplane. The plane contrasted sharply with the nondescript room, appearing fuzzy to his young eyes. He picked the plane up and pretended to fly it for a while finally noticing a smiling man standing behind him in the corner. Almost blending with the wall that Josh could almost see, the man's smile stood out to comfort him. The dream man watched over his young charge through the night. Josh

continued to play with the plane unaware of where he was and not caring about the day's events.

Josh woke early the next day to a dark and rainy morning. He headed for the kitchen to make some cereal planning to go outside with his small sailboats to navigate the widening puddles after breakfast. Clara and Tim were still asleep, but he could hear his grandma stirring in her room off the kitchen as he descended the stairs. She and Josh spent many quiet mornings with each other talking and laughing. Though her speech was slurred and garbled due to her stroke, Josh understood everything she said.

His grandmother's door opened slowly as she knocked her walker against the jamb, breathing heavily and laboring to enter the kitchen. Finally opening the door, she stared bright-eyed at Josh sitting on his knees in a chair at the table. A crooked smile crept onto her face as she groaned and pointed at the coffeepot bubbling on automatic in the corner next to the stove. Josh got up, moved a chair over to the counter, and poured his grandma a cup of coffee. She sank slowly into a chair across the table from Josh's bowl and waited patiently for her morning brew.

Josh sat down and looked up at the narrow face marveling at the lines and grooves that seemed to tell a story of some distant past. He loved everything about the gentle, frail woman who sat across from him every morning sipping from her half-full cup. Her hands shook, but she amazingly never spilled a drop.

"Grandma, have you ever seen a dead bird?" asked Josh with mouthful of cereal.

She nodded her head.

"Do you think if a person touched a dead bird, the bird could come back to life?" he nonchalantly asked wiping a drop of milk from his chin.

She squinted at him, her one good eye wondering about his curious question. She then opened her mouth to speak. A slow, rolling gargle came forth, but Josh understood every word.

"What's bothering you?" she asked, her mouth twisting into grotesque angles from the strain of talking with one side of her face.

"I was out with my friends," Josh said. "Ricky had a pellet gun. You know, like the one I showed you in Dad's hunting magazine."

"Yes," she answered.

"Ricky aimed at this sparrow sitting in the tree and he hit it," Josh's voice trailed off as he took a deep breath.

"Go ahead," his Grandmother said reaching across the table to lift his chin.

Josh's eyes met her gaze as he felt tears trickle down his cheeks. He wiped the moisture with his hand and said with sadness flooding into his voice, "I didn't mean to do it!"

"Do what?" she asked wiping a tear from his under his eye.

"I touched the bird and it just woke up," Josh said. "I thought the bird was dead and then it woke up."

Tears poured out of Josh as his grandmother pulled him gently toward her. He rose and skirted the corner of the table into his grandmother's arms letting his worries flow out into her comforting embrace. She kissed and lightly stroked his hair as he cried.

As she calmed her grandson, she asked gently, "Do you think the bird was dead?"

"I don't know," Josh said wiping his eyes.

"Maybe God brought the bird back and you were just there to see," she said.

"But my friends think I did it," Josh pleaded. "They think I'm a witch or something."

Josh's grandmother smiled crookedly and brushed his blonde hair to one side. "You're a little boy, Josh. A special little boy," she said. "Don't you worry about what they say."

"I don't want them to hate me," Josh said.

"They don't. They just don't understand you like I do," she said pulling him close again.

"I still think they hate me," he mumbled.

"Josh, you have been given a special gift," she struggled, her words slurring through the sentence.

She knew Josh could sense a person's pain and suffering as he had done with her so many times. She also knew he was smarter than any child she'd ever known in her life. To her, these were gifts from God.

Josh understood her words, but not the meaning. He just wanted to know if he brought the bird back to life. Josh wasn't sure anymore if the bird

was dead or not, and it scared him. He remembered the fear in Kevin's eyes, but that didn't bother him as much as the awe he saw on Nick's face.

His grandma suddenly began to cough and wheeze with pain. She rose from her chair to lean on the walker, stopping only to place a shriveled hand on his head. She smiled down at him and then walked into her room to lie down. Josh followed her into the room and covered his grandmother with a blanket, gently rubbing her hand. She stared into his eyes for a long time, feeling the young boy's love and eventually fell asleep. Josh walked quietly out of the room closing the door behind him.

He heard his parents begin to stir above him. Josh placed his bowl in the sink and went upstairs to get dressed for the rain. Clara came into his room just as he was slipping his black rubber boots on. Josh looked like a commercial for Morton Salt in his bright yellow rain jacket with big blue buttons.

"Josh, where are you going?" Clara asked yawning and stretching.

Two brightly colored wooden sailboats sat on the edge of his bed.

"I had cereal and talked to Grandma for awhile," Josh said tying the pull-string on his hood in a bow while trying to hide his tear-stained cheeks. "I think I'll go try my boats out in a few puddles, okay?"

"Okay. How's Grandma this morning?" Clara asked.

"She's got that bad cough again. You know the one when she can't stop," he replied just as his grandmother hacked uncontrollably downstairs.

"I better get her some medicine," she said bending down to give him a hug. "Don't get too wet. I don't want you to catch cold."

Josh hugged her back and then grabbed his boats. He ran down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door. The morning rain was hard but warm as Josh ran around the side of his house out to his front yard. His street was mostly composed of fifty-year-old brick houses with front porches where everyone sat during the hot, still evenings of summer.

Torrents of water rushed out of the pipes on the front of houses, pouring into the street and creating rivers by each curb. Josh set one boat in the gutter, but the swiftness of the current capsized the small vessel. He sighed, picked up his boats, and went in search of a good-sized puddle. Josh knew just where to find one too.

A large puddle usually formed at the end of his street. Sure enough, one house down from Kevin's, a large pool of water had formed in a depression left after some construction the city did on the sewer system. Adults complained that their cars bottomed out in the hole, but the neighborhood kids loved to splash in the large puddle that formed after rainstorms. He set the bigger boat aside and put the little red one in first, turning the small sail his dad built to one side, then the other until a light breeze caught and ballooned the small piece of fabric. As he let go of the boat, Josh imagined leaving for a long voyage to some far-off land as the small craft sailed smoothly across the shallow sea. He jumped halfway across, splashing with both feet, landing in the middle and then repeated the boat's journey over and over as a few cars slowed. Each driver smiled admiring the ingenuity of the small child decked out in his best rain gear.

After awhile, Josh decided to give the larger boat a chance and walked through the puddle, lost in his game and unaware of his surroundings. Josh bent down and placed the red boat carefully on the ground. He turned pivoting on the balls of his feet and found a pair of black Converse tennis shoes standing right next to his larger boat. He peered up at the torn blue jeans, squinting as drops of rain splashed against his face.

Ricky stood wearing a wet sweatshirt that hung off his thin frame. He looked down at Josh with an evil grin. His cheek held a large bruise and his upper lip was split revealing pinkish-white flesh that only added to his appearance of a wet grinning rat. Behind him stood another boy Josh didn't recognize. He was dressed in black jeans, big rubber boots, and a windbreaker. His dirt-smudged face seemed to defy the water running down from his long wet hair. This boy looked a couple of years older than Ricky, but with a dull, blank look in his eyes. His barren eyes peered out beneath strings of reddish brown hair uncut and unkept for many months. As Josh stared at the second boy, Kevin peeked from behind him, his eyes nervously wandering from side-to-side. Josh, startled by his appearance, knew from Kevin's eyes that something was about to happen; he was in trouble.

"What the hell are you doing out here alone?" Ricky sneered as he stepped on one of Josh's sailboat crushing the small craft beneath his weight.

Josh, stifled by fear, didn't respond. As he slowly stood to face Ricky, his knees buckled slightly reaching the apex of his height. His stomach churned

knotting balls of thick bile over and over as he looked up at Ricky whose face was filled with rage.

"What are you, some kind of witch?" Ricky growled bending until his mouth was only inches from Josh's face. "I don't think people like living next door to a witch!"

Josh felt his skin crawl beneath the raincoat feeling cold clamminess against his neck. His brain, numbed by fear, took away speech and the ability to move. Ricky turned to look back at the other two boys creeping forward. As he did, Josh ran, but was caught by the hood and yanked back into Ricky's arms. He kicked his legs and screamed trying to bite Ricky, but his actions had no effect on the larger boy. Animal instincts overtook Josh's small body until he briefly broke from Ricky's grip only to be caught again.

Josh heard Ricky and the stranger laughing as he fought against the clamps that held his arms. Ricky spun him around as easily as a top until he saw the longhaired boy chuckling with his hands on his hips. Kevin stood frozen next to him, staring at Josh with wild excitement in his eyes.

"Pound him, Ricky!" the strange boy shouted. "Better yet, I ain't ever hit a witch. Let me do it."

His eyes were no longer dull and blank with no emotion. They burned red with hatred toward Josh. The boy moved to face him and slapped Josh with the back of his hand, whipping Josh's head to one side. Josh felt like throwing up as Ricky tightened his hold. His tired body, drained by the fight, hung on the older boy's arms. Josh saw a red river running toward the gutter and realized it was his own blood, either coming from his nose, mouth or both. As he looked up, Josh saw Kevin double up his fist and hit his stomach. He dropped to the ground throwing up next to Ricky's torn tennis shoe.

He pictured himself as the trout his father caught last summer flopping on the bank with its mouth gaping and then closing just before his father hit the fish with a club. Josh saw the shoes turn to walk away and then suddenly change their mind. One shoe reared back and swung forward striking the middle of his small chest causing Josh's world to turn dark.

Josh didn't know how long he lay curled up at the edge of the puddle. A dull red haze on the perimeter of the blackness crept ever so slowly back into sight as his mind fumbled with a thought or two about his parents. Terrible pain seeped sluggishly into his awareness, eventually breaking through and

pounding throughout his small body like a hammer. The pain became something that Josh could hold onto as he tried to remember what happened and where he was. His mind shouted words about witches, dead birds, and hexes through his skull. Far off in the distance, he heard a siren and then running feet leaving him alone in pain next to the puddle. Searing agony shot throughout his body when he tried to move crawling aimlessly in all directions.

After a few moments, the throbbing in his chest became a dull aching wound and his senses returned to normal. Josh opened his eyes as the rain, now much harder, blinded him. He struggled to his knees with his head slung low trying to gain his feet. Josh's mind pulsated to some unknown beat, and his body ached as he tried to gather his strength. He staggered to his feet and tried to remember how to walk finally taking an uneasy step and willing himself forward.

The rain slashed against the side of his face mixing with the warm stream coming from his nose. With one eye almost swollen shut, Josh bent to pick up the fragments of his sailboats. As his head traveled below his waist, the blood rushed into his skull causing him almost to fall face down in the puddle. He lumbered under the weight of his injuries until regaining his balance. He hugged the broken miniature yachts to his injured chest and shuffled toward his house as flashing blue lights in the distance appeared like brightly colored stars before him. The world swirled and colors rotated around his eyes with each painful step sending shots of fiery pain throughout his body. Josh struggled onward, dragging one foot slightly behind, determined to reach home.

The lights were stronger now as he approached, alternating blue, white, and red. In front of his house stood a police car and an ambulance at strange angles against the curb. As the rain poured off the sides of the two vehicles, Josh crossed the street, his legs failing him. A woman in a blue parka rushed past, not noticing him, toward the ambulance. He walked, in a stupor, toward his front steps climbing up to the open door. A police officer in a long black raincoat stood in the hallway writing on a small pad talking with his father unaware of Josh's presence. Tim finally looked down, horrified to see his little boy with a little yellow raincoat veined by strings of streaming blood.

"My God, Josh! What happened?" Tim shrieked as he quickly picked up the small boy gently in his arms.

Josh wept into his father's chest letting go of all the pain he felt. Tim tried in vain to comfort his son as he stepped into the kitchen toward Clara sitting slumped over crying just outside her mother's room.

She stared at the floor seeing all its imperfections and thought, we'll have to replace this soon.

A red drop splattered into her sight and then another. Clara's mind, numbed with grief, tried to comprehend each drip spreading out in concentric circles on the waxed floor. Clara slowly looked up and saw Tim holding a yellow raincoat against his body. She followed the curve of the coat deliberately down to small legs attached to dripping wet boots. A red stream ebbed off the edge of the yellow coat sending more drops onto the kitchen floor.

"Josh!" she screamed knocking the chair over and rushing to her child.

Clara gently turned Josh's battered face toward her own. His right eye was swollen closed and blood trickled from his tiny nose. Clara's tears poured like rain as she lurched him away from Tim.

"Mommy, I'm sorry for...," Josh tried to speak.

"Help me!" she pleaded to the paramedic coming out of her mother's room.

"Oh my God! Lay him on the table," he said grabbing a black bag.

Josh looked into his mother's eyes for refuge as the paramedic placed gauze on his nose and bandages on his face. They stripped off his raincoat and gasped lifting his shirt. Josh's small body was covered with black and blue bruises. The paramedic wrapped his ribs and then went outside to get another gurney.

Josh hugged his mother and looked past his parents into his grandmother's room. Another paramedic sat packing wires into bags next to a monitor as a green line crossed the screen silently, ominously.

"Mommy, where's Grandma?" Josh slurred out of his bloated, cut, and chapped lips.

He couldn't comprehend what his eyes showed him.

"Josh, Grandma...," Clara choked under the strain of the words. "Grandma died."

Her eyes welled up waiting for her little boy, beaten and abused, to respond. Josh stared into his grandmother's room as the paramedics brought a gurney through the kitchen. His body lost all strength as he collapsed into his parent's arms. No tears fell from Josh's eyes, but as he started to speak his stomach convulsed and suddenly brought up his remaining breakfast. He coughed and gagged on the bile and blood filling his mouth holding his parent's shoulders as tightly as his little arms could. Clara grabbed a towel off the counter and wiped his face.

The paramedics covered his grandmother with a white sheet while the rain, whipped by the wind, lashed against the metal roof of the back porch reaching a crescendo as they wheeled his grandmother out.