

A GHOST IN SILENCE



Other Books by Clayton Bess

Story for a Black Night

Best First Novel, Commonwealth Club of CA, 1982

Phoenix Honor Award, 2002

"A riveting meditation on the moral choices that must be made in living..."(*starred *Booklist*); "An unabashed moral tale and a crowd-holding story." (*starred *Kirkus*)

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Tracks

A.L.A. Best Book for Young Adults, 1986

"...a glorious adventure." (*Booklist*); "...at once sweet and gripping, sad and strong...its pace fast and its philosophy rich." (*Bestsellers*); "The acclaimed author's new novel is... indelibly etched in the reader's mind." (*Publishers Weekly*)

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A GHOST IN SILENCE

by
Clayton Bess

Illustrations by
David Rauscher



LOOKOUT
P R E S S

SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

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Cataloging Data

Summary: When ten-year-old Dillon's beloved big brother Chazz makes his quiet announcement, it is a bombshell for his family. Their parents first explode into uproar then implode into silence, a silence through which Dillon wanders like a ghost.

- [1. Family Problems—Juvenile Fiction. 2. Brothers—Juvenile Fiction.
3. Coming Out (Sexual Orientation)—Juvenile Fiction.
4. Child Authors—Juvenile Fiction.] I. Title.
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**To loving, understanding
families around the world.**

Thanks for being there,

~C.B.

**Rumble says,
“Share the message.”**

~D.R.



Chapter

1

I felt like a ghost today. All day, walking around school, I felt just like a ghost. No one looked at me. Or if they looked, they didn't see me. Nobody knew who I was. Or if they knew me, they didn't call me by name. Or if they called me by name, they didn't know it was me, a ghost, and not Dillon.

Yesterday I didn't even know myself. What I mean is that yesterday I knew my name was Dillon Moore, but I didn't know who Dillon Moore was. I knew I was the son of Chaswick Moore and Linda Dillon Moore and the brother to Chazz Moore, "the baseball legend of Hanover High." But I didn't know I was a ghost.



This is a picture I drew of the way my mom drives. And talks. Well, Chazz helped on this picture a little. He said he wanted to get my mom's physiognomy just right. By that I think he meant the crazed look in her eyes when she gets behind the wheel.

That's Broder High School. That's me in the back seat and that's me, too, in the mirror. Chazz says that's impossible, but I call it "artistic freedom" which is what an artist like me is free to do.

Hanover High is where I'll go, but only after I go to Hanover Middle School, and I'm not going there until almost a year from now. Or maybe not even then, because maybe they don't let ghosts in.

That would be terrible for my mom because every time we drive past Hanover High she has to point at it and tell me that that is where I'll be going. "Hanover High, Dillon, that's where you're going." And whenever my dad hears my mom say that, he has to say, "And you're going to be as big a baseball star as your big brother." And if Chazz is there, and hears all that, then Chazz just looks at me and raises his eyebrows and grins at me. Chazz always tells me that I can be anything that I want, even a world famous artist.

But I'm not so sure. Especially after last night.

Last night was Sunday night, and Sunday night is usually the best night of the week, the night that Chazz comes home for dinner, the night my mom's eyes have got a zillion stars in them, and my dad can't stop laughing.

Then, after dinner, when Chazz gets up to leave, and my mom and dad load him down with leftovers, and I stand at the front door and watch Chazz go down the walk and get into his car and drive away, my heart pinches up until it hurts. That's because we all love Chazz so much.

Or we used to love him. Until awful last night.

Grammy Rose is always saying about Chazz, "Chazzy has a face that women dream about, a physique that men would die for, and a heart and soul that is the envy of the angels."

When my dad and my brother hear this, they start doing this winking thing at me to let me know that I'm not supposed to believe everything I hear. And if Grandma Moore is around and hears Grammy Rose say that, then Grandma Moore starts with this clucking noise, but she doesn't say anything out loud until after



Grammy Rose goes home. Then Grandma Moore tells my dad that his “wife's mother” shouldn't be lording it over the angels because the angels have “ways mysterious” of reeking revenge. And Grandpa Moore says that Chazz is “no better nor no worse” than any of God's beans, and that my dad better tell his “wife's mother” that.



I have never heard my Grandpa or Grandma Moore call my Grammy Rose by her name, but only “your wife's mother” if they're talking to my dad, or “your mother's mother” if they're talking to me and Chazz. Chazz pointed that out to me, and I've paid attention, and he's right.

Chazz is always right about everything. Chazz doesn't say anything unless he already knows he's right about it. Chazz goes to night classes at night and to day classes during the day over at the college, when he can get away from work. But he has to work a lot because he has to make his ends meet, and since he moved into his apartment he has a lot more ends to make meet. Like furniture, and gas and electricity. Those are what they call “ends” and you have to make money to make them meet. Chazz bought this cool laptop computer, and he lets me use it, like how I'm finishing up this story now. I like to type my stories into Chazz's computer because you can polish the words you want to say and check your spelling, because mine is awful.

In Chazz's classes they're always teaching him about what they call “applications” on the computer, and then Chazz teaches me all the things that he learns. He's also got a lot of cool books in his backpack, and he doesn't mind if I go through his backpack to find a book, or whatever. He keeps gum in there for me, too. Chazz used to let me use his computer any night of the week, but since he moved into his apartment, now I can only

do it on Sunday nights. And that's the main reason that Sunday nights are so cool. Except, like I say, last night, when it all happened.

Last night at the dinner table Chazz seemed to be the same old Chazz. Maybe he was a little weird, now that I think back about it. Maybe he was a little quiet. Yeah, and Mom was way weird, now that I think back about it. She was doing what my dad always calls “chattering” because you can almost hear my mom's teeth clacking. Only last night her chattering was way more than usual, non-stop and about nothing at all, like she was really nervous and didn't want anyone to say anything. Like, just because we were eating corn with the roast beef and potatoes, she started talking fast about corn and Nebraska and gasoline and this woman on TV that she can't stand, and she kept saying, “Chaswick? Chaswick?” like she was asking my dad for help, but he just kept shoveling it in. And then, right at the end of the meal, just as my dad was about to push his chair back from the table, and just as my mom stopped her chattering, Chazz started to say something.

He said, “Mom. Dad. Dillon.” And he looked at each one of us when he said our names. Then he said, “I’ve got something I’ve got to tell you.”



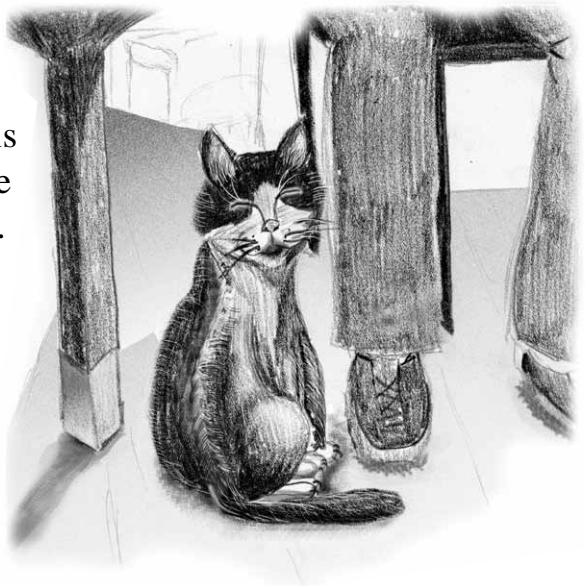
My mom looked down at the plate of leftover roast beef, and she put her finger over a nick in the edge, like she thought she could hide it.



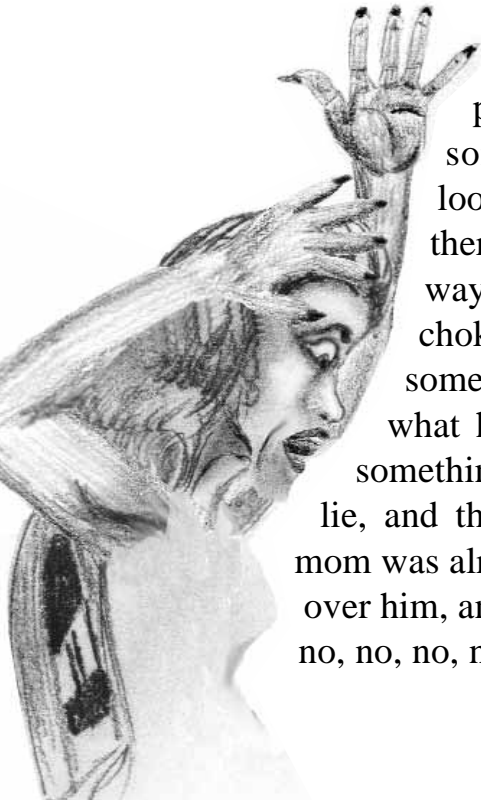
My dad folded his napkin. I looked down at Rumble, my cat, who was sitting at my feet.



Rumble had his eyes curved down in a squint and his lips curved up, the way that he grins. Chazz kept talking.



I know that when you write a story, or whatever, you're supposed to use what they call "quotation marks" for the things people say, and you're supposed to use what they call "italics" to give certain words punch. Italics are those slanty letters, and when you see them you're supposed to punch those words. So like you're supposed to write, "Grammy Rose said, 'Blah-dee-blah,' but Grandpa Moore corrected her, like always, saying, 'Oh, *no!* Blah-dee-*blah!*' back at her."

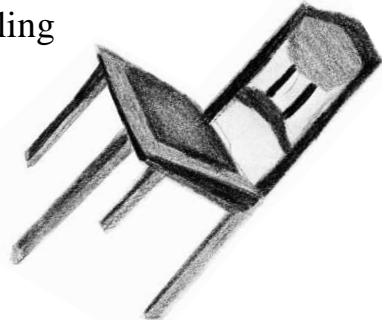
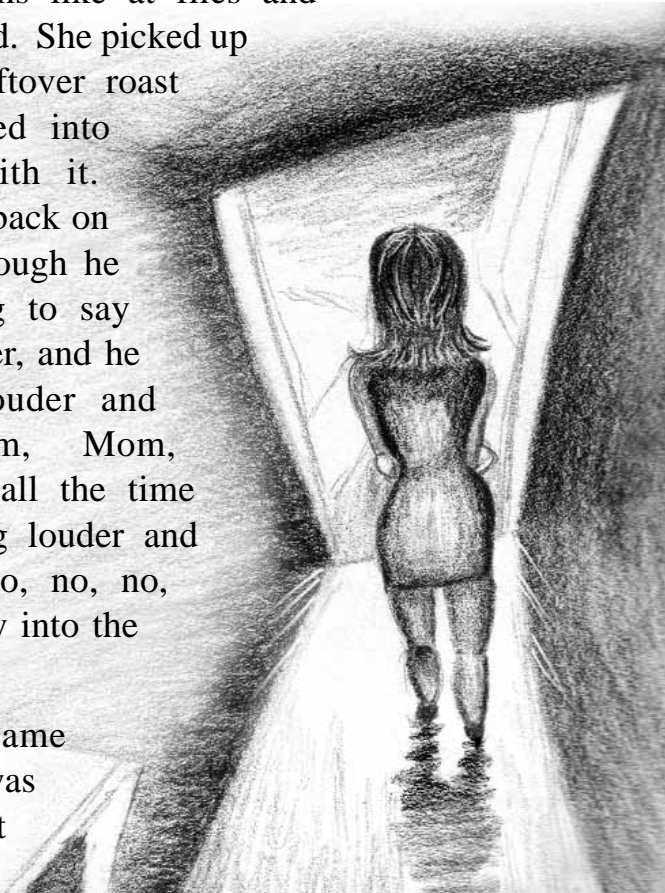


But the thing was that with Chazz, it didn't happen just like that. Chazz said something, yes, but I was looking down at Rumble, and there was something about the way Chazz said it, like he was choking on his roast beef or something, that I didn't get all of what he was saying. He told us something about how he was living a lie, and then something else, but my mom was already on her feet and talking over him, and she kept saying just, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no," like that, and

waving her arms like at flies and shaking her head. She picked up the plate of leftover roast beef and started into the kitchen with it. She turned her back on Chazz, even though he was still trying to say something to her, and he was getting louder and saying, “Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom!” all the time she was getting louder and saying, “No, no, no, no, no!” all the way into the kitchen.

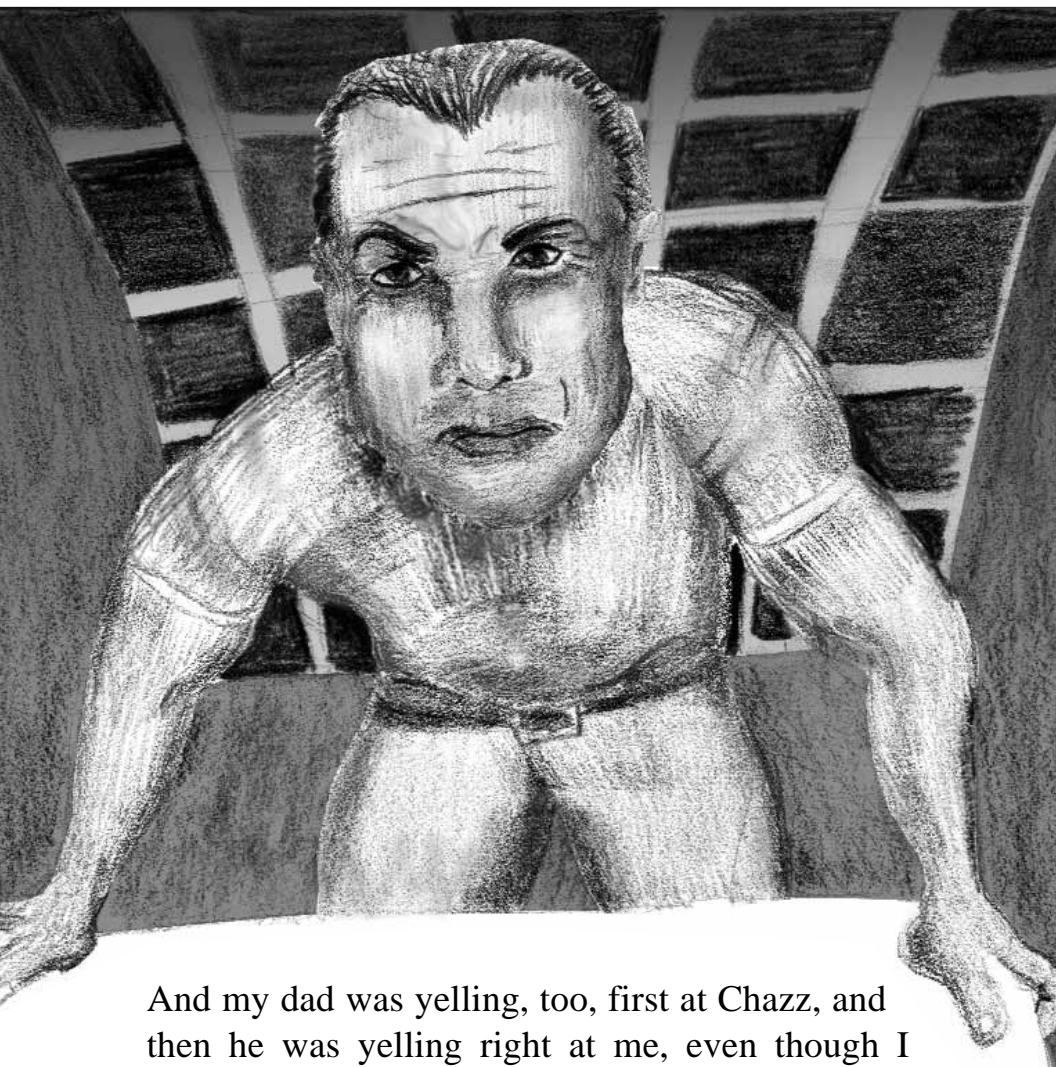
At the same time, my dad was starting to get up from the table, too. But he was so mad that when he stood up, his chair went falling backwards onto the floor.

It made this big crash, and that made Rumble start trying to run away,





but his claws on all four paws were just scratching on the wood of the floor, and he couldn't get a grip to go. But then he did start running, and he ran up the stairs, meowing really loud because he was so scared by my dad.



And my dad was yelling, too, first at Chazz, and then he was yelling right at me, even though I didn't do anything. I never saw my dad so mad as this, with veins sticking out of his head and neck. He was yelling at me to go upstairs to my room.

I really wanted to get out of there, like Rumble, but Chazz grabbed onto my arm and told me that he wanted me to stay. Chazz was the only one who was still sitting. He was just sitting there and holding onto the table with one hand and holding onto me with the other and looking right into my eyes. But my dad yelled at me again to go up to my room, and this time he started for me, and that was really scary. My dad has never ever hit me, but he looked like he was going to hit me now, or shove me up the stairs.

I pulled my arm away from Chazz and ran for the stairs but then I heard this crash in the kitchen like Mom dropped the plate of roast beef, and I stopped on the stairs.

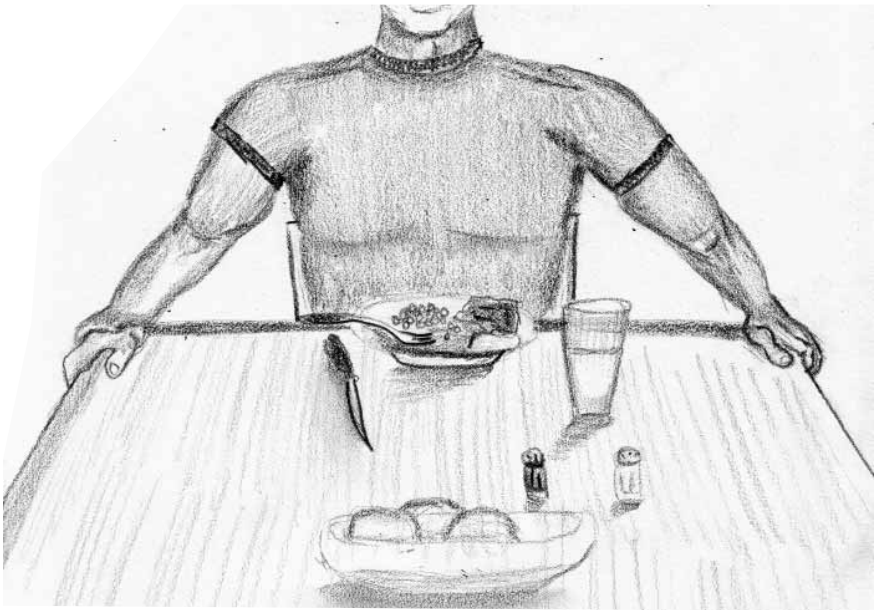


My dad stopped yelling and turned to the kitchen. Chazz was silent now, too. Then there were more crashes. No sound anywhere else, just crashes in the kitchen. Then Dad went to the door and looked into the kitchen, and the crashes stopped.

My dad stood there a couple of seconds, then he talked through the doorway in a voice so quiet that I couldn't hear what he said. I couldn't hear anything from my mom either. But in a second my dad turned fast back to Chazz and started yelling at him all this stuff about look what Chazz did now, and how could Chazz do that to his mother, and telling Chazz to get out of the house and don't come back. That's what he said. I remember this because there was nobody else talking or yelling or crying, and I could hear every word, to remember them.

“Don't come back! You go think about this, and you get it out of your head. And don't come back until you do. And then you come back, and you say you're sorry to your mother, and you tell us it's not true.”

But Chazz didn't get up to leave. He stayed like he was, holding onto the edge of the table with both hands and talking really slow, and low, and he said, "It *is* true. And you've got to get used to it."





This made my dad madder than ever, and then he looked up and saw that I was still on the stairs, and I didn't wait to get yelled at again but



ran upstairs and into my room and locked the door. Rumble was on the bed, squeezed up in the corner against the pillows, and hissing.

I got on the bed with him and squeezed up into the corner, too, and stacked the pillows between us and the door.

I took Rumble in my arms. He was all shaky. Everyone says that Rumble is an old cat, but Chazz told me that Rumble is exactly the same age I am, even though I'm just a kid. Our Grammy Rose gave Rumble to Chazz as a kitten the day I was born because Rumble was supposed to make Chazz feel better. Grammy Rose is always telling me, about Rumble, "Well, your mom and dad got a new baby in the house, and why shouldn't Chazzy have a new baby, too?" When Chazz moved out of the house last year, he told me that Rumble was too old to move to his apartment, which is downtown and with a lot of traffic. Now I'm the one who takes care of Rumble. That's why I was taking care of Rumble last night, because he's an old cat and could have a heart attack. But I'm still just a kid.

Then I heard Chazz coming up the stairs, the way he comes up them, two at a time. He tried to get in my door, but I had locked it. So Chazz started yelling on the other side of the door, something about the kids at school, but it didn't make any sense. My dad came up the stairs, too, yelling, too.

They were both yelling about the kids at school, and Chazz was yelling about how I was supposed to do something about the kids at school, but my dad kept yelling, “They’re just kids! They’re just kids!” And there was more, but I didn’t get any of it because Rumble started trying to get away from me as soon as Chazz came up and started pounding on the door. But I was stupid and was trying to calm Rumble down, and finally he had to claw at me to get away, and he jumped down and hid under the bed. He clawed me pretty bad, and I was bleeding on my arms, but he didn’t mean it.

I crawled under the bed with Rumble. I took a pillow with me, and I covered my head with the pillow. But I could still hear the yelling and the pounding on the door. Then the yelling went back down the stairs. Then the front door slammed. It shook the house, and I felt it in the floor where I was under the bed with Rumble. And then there was silence.

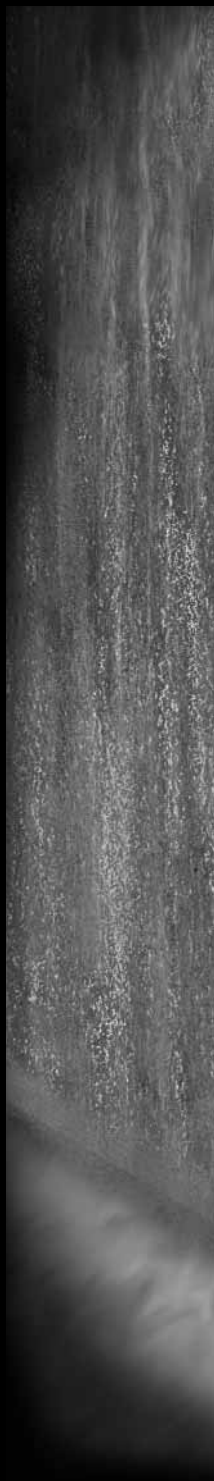
There was this awful silence.

For I don't know how long, silence.



A long time later, I got out from under the bed and went to the door and opened it, and looked to see.

Rumble came, too, and looked
to see.

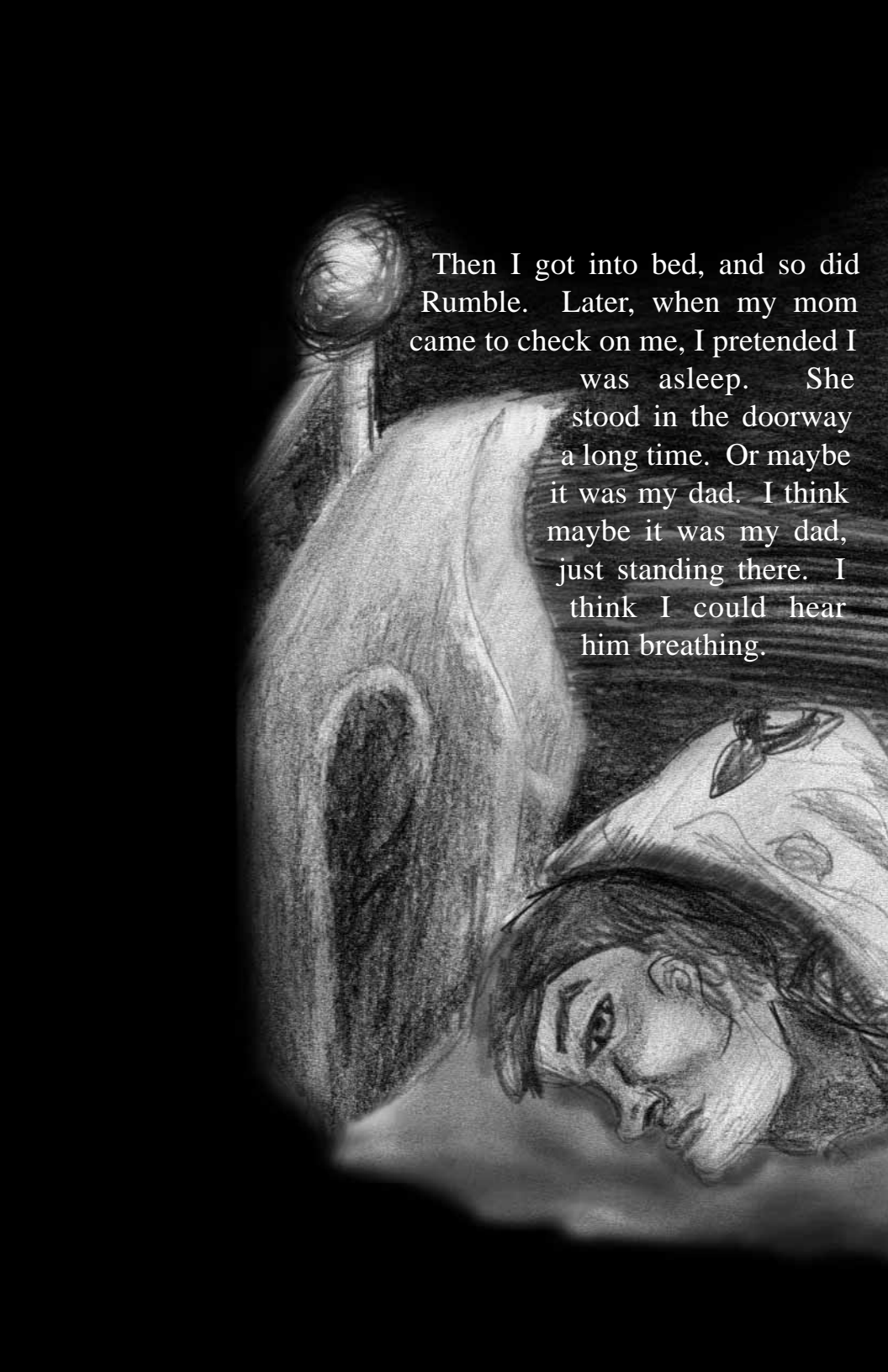




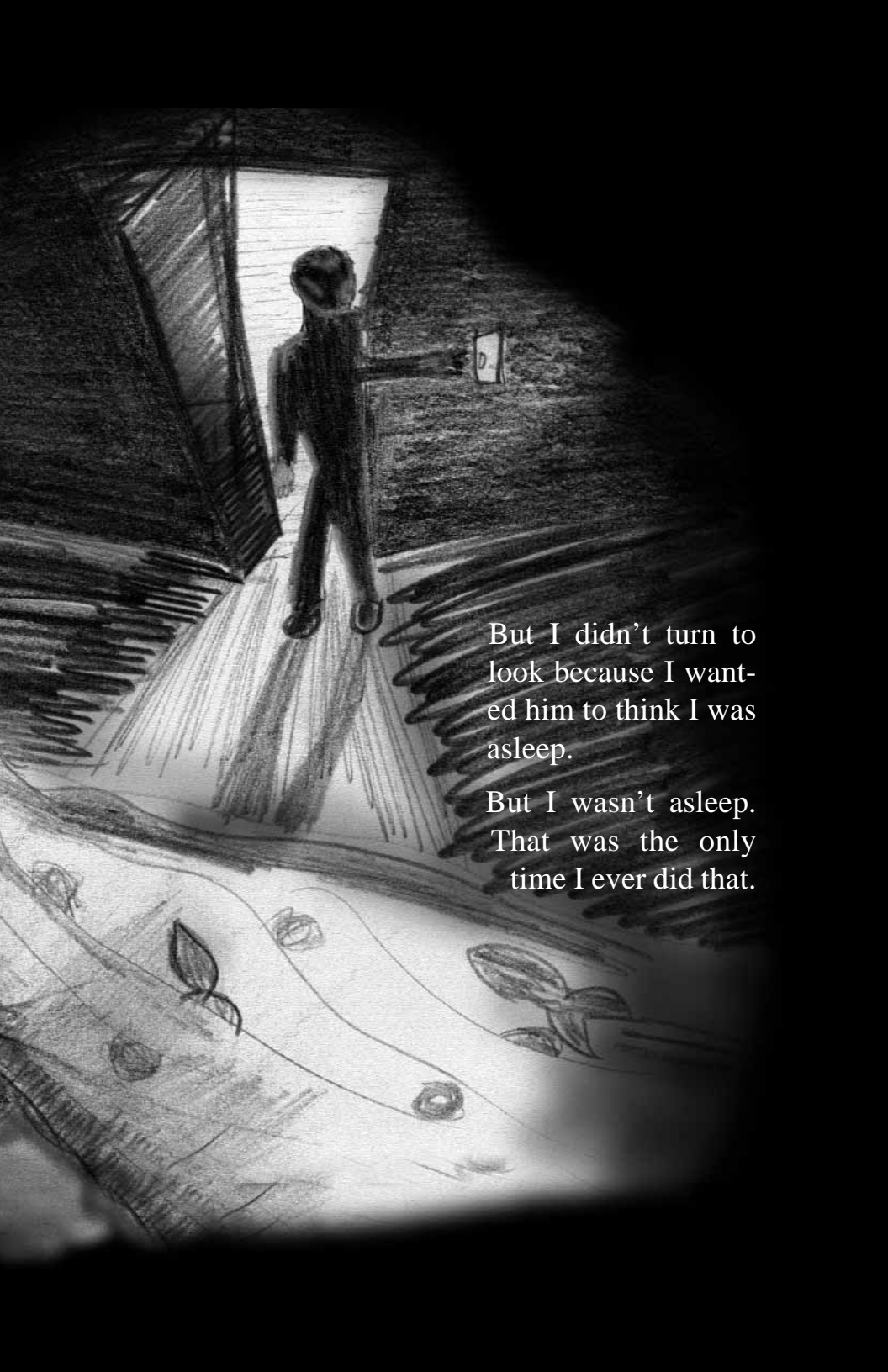


And we listened to the silence.





Then I got into bed, and so did Rumble. Later, when my mom came to check on me, I pretended I was asleep. She stood in the doorway a long time. Or maybe it was my dad. I think maybe it was my dad, just standing there. I think I could hear him breathing.



But I didn't turn to look because I wanted him to think I was asleep.

But I wasn't asleep. That was the only time I ever did that.



Chapter

2

At breakfast, no one talked. It was like all three of us were ghosts who couldn't see each other, my mom and my dad and me. Me, I got out of the house fast and came to school. But here at school I was still a ghost. I knew this as soon as I got here because the kids were all playing and yelling at each other but no one saw me, and no one talked to me.

Then Adam Goff called Joey Blinder a fag, and that's when it all happened. Adam didn't mean anything bad. That's just the way the kids talk when someone messes up, like drops the ball or falls on his head, or whatever. But this time,

when Adam called Joey a fag, it made me really mad. I wasn't thinking about what I was doing, and I ran up and shoved my face in Adam's face and yelled at him to shut up and then I pushed him so hard that he fell back and down hard on his butt. Or on his behind, or whatever you want to call it. And it hurt him, too, because he started to cry.

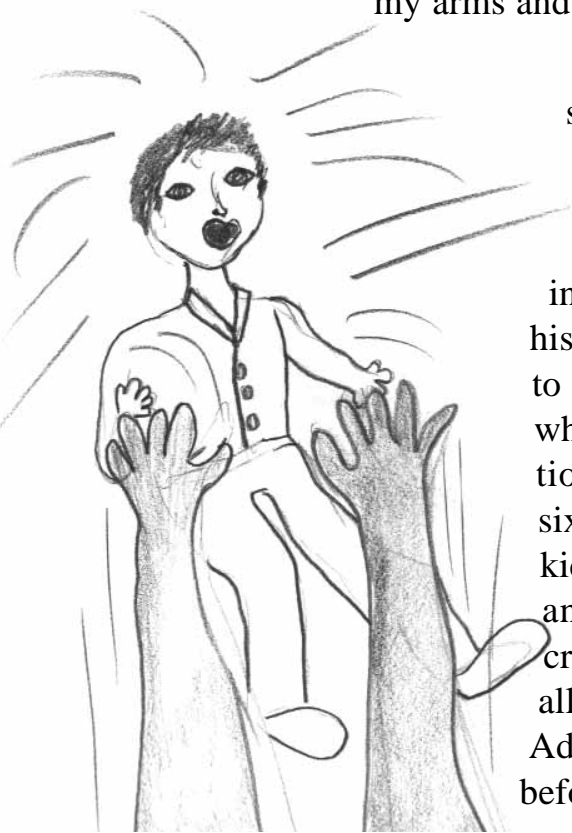


See, this is what happened. I remember now what I couldn't remember then. Or didn't remember. Or didn't want to remember. Or something.

Chazz says it's a "click" but my dad calls it a "breakthrough" and my mom calls it a "sudden understanding" but I think Chazz is closer to it when he calls it a "click" because it's when you don't get something, and then suddenly you do get it, like you clicked on a light inside your brain. But sometimes, it's like you just keep clicking, like you've got a little light over here, click, and then a little light over there, click, but you still can't see the whole thing yet because there's still a lot of darkness.

That's how it was clicking inside my own head. Adam called Joey a fagg and I yelled at him and pushed him down and, click, I remembered my dad yelling at Chazz, over and over, "You are not a faggot! You are not a faggot! You are not a faggot!" That was what he was yelling last night while I was on the bed with Rumble. And Chazz kept yelling back, over and over, that no, he was *not* a faggot, that he was *gay*. "No, I am *not* a faggot, I'm gay! That *is* the truth. I *am* gay. I am *not* a faggot."

And click, there was that other thing when Chazz came running up the stairs and yelling outside my door about the kids at school, and when my dad kept yelling that we're all just kids. It was something about the way the kids are always calling each other "fag" and how I'm supposed to stop the kids when they do that. Or something like that. But I can't remember because that's when Rumble was trying to get out of my arms and scratching me all up.



But none of that started clicking until Adam was bouncing on his butt on the playground and crying. Then Adam got on his feet and was wanting to fight me because it's what they call "humiliation" when you're a sixth-grader and another kid knocks you down and makes you start crying right in front of all the little kids. I saw Adam coming at me, but before he could reach me

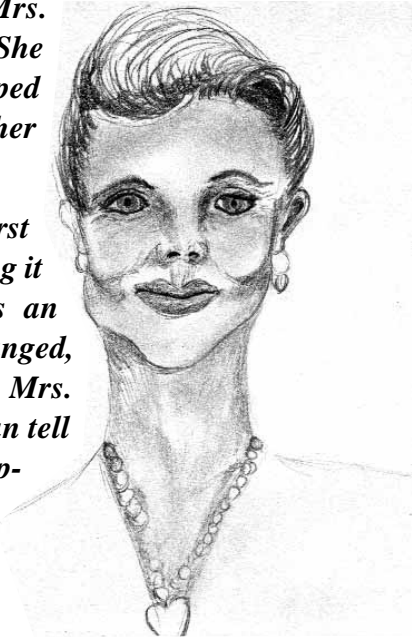
Coach West grabbed him by the shoulders. That's when our teacher Mrs. Whitehall stepped in, too, talking in that voice she uses when she's really mad at you. It's not loud, but it sure gets your attention.

"I saw that, Dillon! You come with me! Adam, you go to class, and I don't want any grief from you!"

Mrs. Whitehall calls just about everything "grief" but my mom says grief is when people die. Sometimes words can mean more than one thing.

This is a picture I drew of Mrs. Whitehall on the first day of school. She was really nice that day. Chazz helped me a little on this picture to polish her face.

You should know that when I first started writing this story, I was writing it for Mrs. Whitehall because it was an assignment. But then everything changed, and now I'm not writing it for Mrs. Whitehall any more. That's why I can tell the truth about everything that happened, even though maybe Mrs. Whitehall may not seem all that nice anymore. Well, you'll see what I mean, if you keep reading.



I wanted to tell Adam that I was sorry, and that I didn't mean to push him down, but Mrs. Whitehall was "marching" me to the Principal's Office. I put "marching" in quotation marks because that's the word Mrs. Whitehall always uses when she sends a kid to the Office. "You, march!" she says, and all the kids know what she means. Only Mrs. Whitehall had never told me to march before.

And I had never even been to The Office before except for little things. So Ms. Peabody, our principal was surprised when she saw Mrs. Whitehall push me into one of those chairs where the bad kids have to sit. Mrs. Whitehall talked to Ms. Peabody in a voice I couldn't hear, and both of them kept looking at me. Then Mrs. Whitehall left, but not before she gave me that look that she saves for kids that commit a capital offense.

Ms. Peabody came over and sat down in one of the other bad-kid chairs and she seemed like she was trying to be nice, but I don't know her

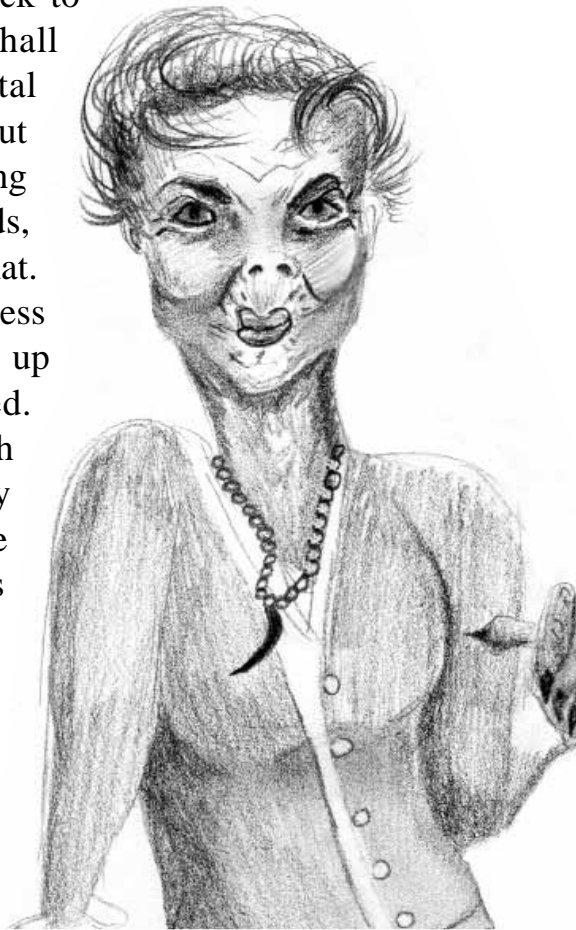


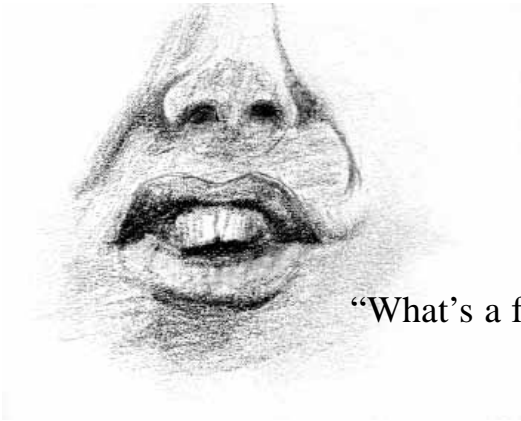
too well, and maybe she wasn't being nice at all. I couldn't tell if that was a smile or if she was opening her mouth to eat me up like Little Red Riding Hood. She wanted to know why I pushed Adam down, but I didn't see how I could tell that to Ms. Peabody because I wasn't even sure why. It had something to do with my brother living a lie and having a big fight with my dad and mom, and a lot of yelling about faggots, but how could I tell Ms. Peabody any of that? So I just said I didn't know, and I guess that wasn't a lie. And I told her that I was sorry. And that wasn't a lie either.

Ms. Peabody made me sit in The Office for a long time, and I was like a ghost. When those people who answer the phones in The Office would look at me, they wouldn't look right at me but all around me, and they would pinch up their noses like they could smell me, and I was something bad, but they couldn't see me. And they would whisper to each other, and I kept hearing the word "fag" "fag" "fag" in their whispers. I don't know how they could know anything about any of that, but that's what it sounded like. And I was a ghost, and those people didn't know me, and they didn't know my brother and how he is suddenly

something so bad that my dad ran him out of the house and my mom isn't talking any more, and how we're all like a ghost family now.

When Ms. Peabody dismissed me from The Office and I went back to class, Mrs. Whitehall gave me the capital offense look again, but she didn't say anything in front of all the kids, so I was glad of that. She kept me in at recess so that I could make up the work I missed. When I was alone with her, I made up my mind to ask the question that was bothering me.





“What’s a faggot?” I asked.



Mrs. Whitehall looked at me hard and then looked away and pressed her lips together in a couple of wrinkled bunches the way she does when she wants you to know that you're just about to cross over the line and commit a capital offense, but so far you haven't quite yet, but you should watch out.



“That’s not a word we use, Dillon.”

“They use it outside.”

“Who does?”

“All the kids.”

“Promise me that you won’t use that word ever again. It’s not appropriate, and we don’t use it. We don’t even think it.”

I didn’t say anything more but I made up my mind to go at lunchtime to see Mary Moppin. Maybe Mary Moppin might help.

Chapter

3

Mary Moppin is this really nice woman who works in the kids section at the public library, which is right next door to the school. Mary Moppin has a deal with Ms. Peabody that certain kids can go to the library at lunchtime if we want. She calls us “the bibliophiles” which means “booklovers in a dead language” and she says that one of us bibliophiles is going to write the great American novel if we get old enough. Mary Moppin is always loaning you her favorite books, and you're always



*This is Mary Moppin waving
'Hello' at me.*

happy to read them, especially because Mary Moppin always wants to talk to you about them when you bring them back. She tells some of the kids, like me, that it's all right to call her Mary instead of Ms. Moppin, but my mother told me that it's rude for kids to call grownups by their first name, and so I call her Mary Moppin.

I went into the library at lunch and found Mary Moppin and said, "Hi, Mary Moppin."

"Hi, Dillon Moore," she said back and smiled the way she does.

"Do you have any good books on faggots?"

Mary Moppin looked surprised and didn't answer me right away, but then she asked me if I meant gay people, and I said yes. She thought about it a minute, and kept looking right at me. She opened her mouth and closed it a couple of times like she had a lot of words to say and was trying to find the right ones. This is something Chazz taught me about how people say things. Chazz says that when you're writing and you're quoting someone and they do this thing like a pause, because they're thinking of what to say

next, then you're supposed to use dot dot dot. Chazz says they call these dot dot dots "lipsies" and I think the reason for that is because usually when people are thinking hard like that, they squeeze up their lips a lot. Sort of like how Mrs. Whitehall did it, only not in a mean way.

And that's how Mary Moppin did now. She started to talk and said, "Not ..." and then she did a lipsy pause like it was really hard for her to say, so that the words that she said next were, "Not ... for ... your age."

"How come?"

"They don't make them."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

I didn't say anything, but I didn't think this was a very good answer. It looked like Mary Moppin knew what I was thinking because she told me to wait a second. Then she went into one of the back rooms, and pretty soon she came back with two books for kids. One was called *Heather Has Two Mommies* and the other was called *Daddy's Roommate*. "You have to read them

here,” she said. “You can’t check them out.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re special books.”

“What makes them special?”

“Well, every time we put these two books on the shelf, they get stolen. Then we have to buy new copies.”

This surprised me. I said, “People steal books out of the library?”

“Sometimes.”

“Because they want them so much?”

“No, because they *don’t* want them, but they don’t want other people to see them, so they steal them. That’s why we keep these two books locked up.”



I took the books to a table and read them. They were short and easy, and I was able to finish them before lunch recess was over. When I gave them back to Mary Moppin, she wanted to know if the books helped. I told her not really.

Then she asked if she could make a suggestion, and I said sure. One of the things I like about Mary Moppin is she's always making suggestions. Usually it's about a book that you'll like to read, but this time she said, "If you talk to people about this, you should probably use the word 'gay' instead of 'faggot' because gay people don't like that word."

That's when a couple of clicks started clicking. That must be why Chazz got so mad about faggots and how no one should be using that word, and my dad was using the word. I guess that had something to do with why my dad was so mad, too. But still, it didn't make good sense to me. Mary Moppin was just looking at me like she wanted to help me but didn't know how. And I guess I didn't feel so much like a ghost, while I was still there with her. But then when I left and headed back to class, I started thinking about how

not only was I the brother of something so bad that no one would talk about it, but also how books about it had to be locked up, even by nice people like Mary Moppin. And when I got back to class, I was feeling more like a ghost than ever.

First thing Mrs. Whitehall did was to tell us to take out paper and write a story. She said she wanted a story about family. She said if we didn't finish it by the end of school, we should consider it homework.

I decided to write my story about a family of ghosts.



And here's where and why I first started writing this story. But like I said, everything changes. So keep reading.

Chapter

4

So when the bell rings and school lets out, I take my story and the pictures that I've drawn for my story, and I place them very carefully into my portfolio. Chazz gave me my portfolio for my last birthday and told me that "portfolio" means "carry big papers" and that now, because I'm going to become a real artist, I have to have a real portfolio to always carry my drawings around and never let them get folded or wrinkled or dirty. Chazz knows that I do a lot of drawing.

In fact, I make my own comic books and I've got my own superhero and all. Chazz gave him his name, PantherBoy. I was going to call him RumbleBoy, but Chazz told me that PantherBoy is

way cooler. PantherBoy is always doing a lot of cool things, like stalking the jungles of New York, New York, and bringing criminals to justice. And Chazz says that he is going to teach me how to put my drawings into his computer where we can do reversals so that PantherBoy is all white and the background is all black, or other colors. Too cool. And we can do text wrap, so the words on the paper can wrap all around PantherBoy's body in weird patterns, if we want. And we can do lots of other really cool computer things to PantherBoy's physiognomy.

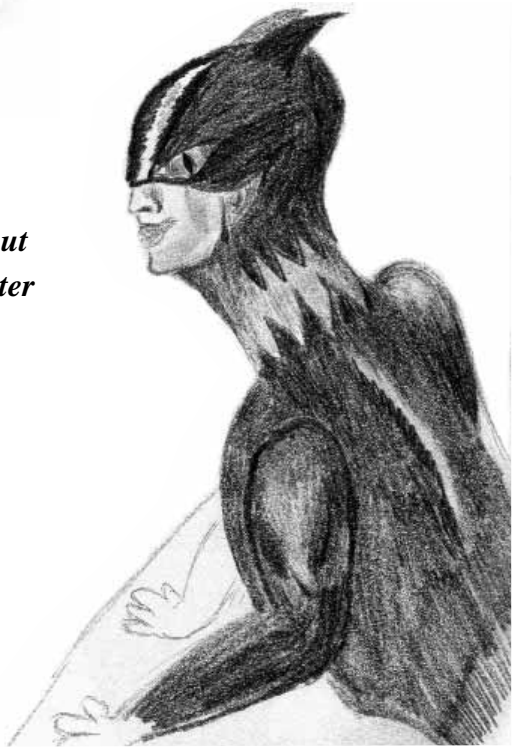


I save all my drawings. Some I work on again and again to polish them, and some I like to leave rough because that's the way I like them. It just depends on my artistic freedom that day.

*This is how I drew
PantherBoy at first.*



*But then I figured out
how to draw him better
and better.*

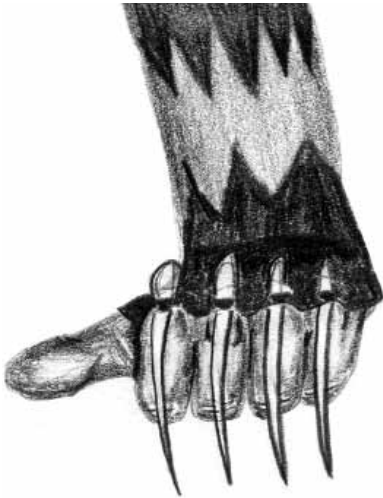




There are these people called “publishers” and they’re the ones who make the books that Mary Moppin has in the library. What you do is make your book, and then you send it to the publishers, and if they like your book, they make a lot of copies of it, and you secure your fame and fortune and capture your wider public. That’s what Chazz and I are



going to do with PantherBoy, but Chazz says, “First things first.” And that’s why I’m writing this story first, and drawing these drawings.



This is how PantherBoy sticks out his claws.

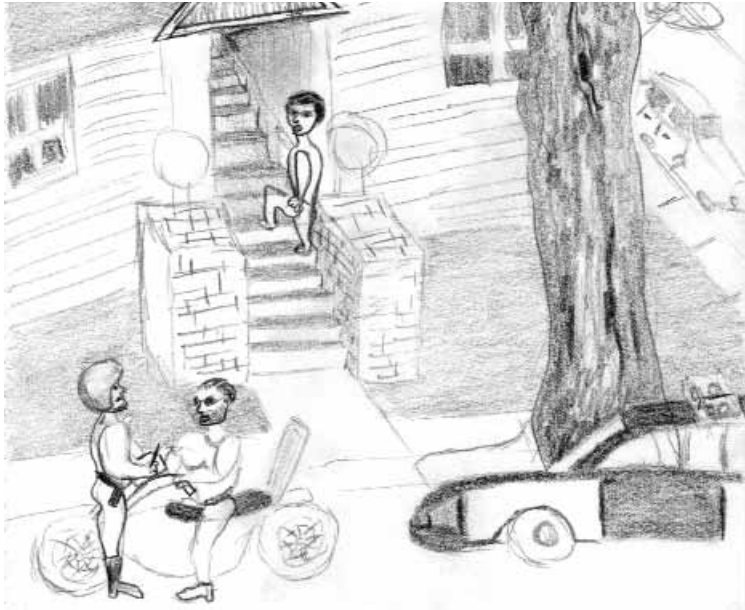
And that's why, when school lets out, I place the pages so carefully into the portfolio. And when I get out to the field for after-school practice, I lean my portfolio up against my backpack in the shade of that tree out there, so that all my PantherBoys and the new drawings of the ghost family are safe. Then I take my baseball glove out of my backpack and get set to run out on the field. But just then I see the downtown bus coming up to the corner and, click, I make this split-second decision to cut practice. The next second I've got my portfolio and backpack and I'm running for the bus and yelling to Coach West that I can't make practice today because I've got to go see my brother because my brother's got an emergency.

I guess that's not a lie.

I know how to ride the buses to Chazz's apartment. I've done it before. My mother took me the first time, but then she let me go once on my own and said it would be good experience, and she gave me notes for the bus drivers. It's just two buses you have to remember. I've got the money because I took extra money out of my stash this morning before I left for school. So, see? That's the click. Because why did I take the extra money

this morning unless I knew all along that I was going to cut practice after school and take the bus downtown to see Chazz? I guess I did know. I guess I knew then, and I guess I know now. That's the click.

I get off the bus at Chazz's stop and come up the street and see this policeman giving a ticket to a guy on a motorcycle in front of Chazz's apartment. The policeman looks up at me weird, like maybe I'm breaking some law by walking up the street. Maybe kids walking on the street are somehow bad and then the police can give the kid a ticket. I start up the steps to Chazz's apartment, but I keep one eye on the policeman.



The front door is open with only the screen door latched, and I can hear voices inside. The front room is empty and I can see through the kitchen doorway that someone's got their feet up on the kitchen table, which is this really old table that's about to fall down. Chazz bought that table at the same garage sale where he bought my baseball glove for me. Chazz says it's hard to find a good left-hander's glove that's already broken in, and the new ones are too stiff. He said he would give me his old glove, but it's a right-hander's glove, and that wouldn't work for me.



Through the kitchen doorway I can see this baseball being tossed back and forth across the table and so I yell through the screen that there's no throwing baseballs in the house and to get their feet off the table.

The voices inside stop. The feet come off the table and then Chazz comes into the kitchen doorway, and then this other guy comes and stands behind him and Chazz says to him, “Hey, it’s my brother, Dillon.” Chazz comes to the front door and unlatches it and says, “Hey, Dill.”



But I don't know what to say next, and suddenly I can't help it but I start crying like a baby. It's stupid to cry like a baby, especially in front of your big brother and this other guy that you don't even know. And I can't even tell you why I'm doing it, and that makes it worse, and that makes me cry harder, and I hate it. Chazz grabs me and pulls me inside and up hard against his chest and then he pushes me toward the kitchen and rubs my head all over hard and tells me that he's got a Coke with my name on it. I know that he doesn't mean that it really has my name on it. That's just the kind of thing that Chazz is always saying because he's, like, playing with you. The next thing I'm sure of Chazz is putting this Coke in my hand and telling me that this other guy is named Kenny, and Kenny's standing there looking at me, all grinning, but not in a mean way.

Then Kenny says why don't I come out back where it's not so hot and he'll show me the fountain that he made, and Chazz pushes me



out the back screen door. Kenny turns on this fountain which is nothing but a garden sprinkler running down this pile of rocks, but it's kind of cool, and Kenny's kind of cool the way he shows me how he made it. It splashes nice, and it's nice to be in the shade of the big trees, and at Chazz's apartment, and having a Coke with my name on it, with Chazz, and this guy, Kenny. And so then pretty soon I'm not feeling so stupid anymore.

Then Chazz says to me, "Sup, Dill?"

"Sup with you?" I say back.
"Sup with last night?"

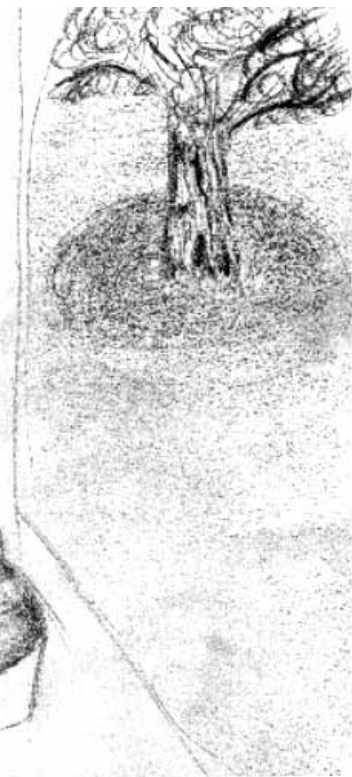
"Well, did you understand what I was trying to tell all of you?"

"Yeah."

"That I'm gay?"

"Yeah. Sup with that?"

"And Kenny's my partner. You understand that?"



I don't say anything to that. I don't think I really get it. I don't think I really want to. But I say, "Mom and Dad are weird. I think they're dropping you out of the family."

Chazz wants to know what my mom and dad told me about him after he left, and I tell him that they didn't talk to me at all. Then I ask Chazz if he's coming for dinner next Sunday night and I say, "You're not, are you?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see if they invite me. Us," he says, and he nods his head to Kenny. Then he tells Kenny that he wanted to get my mom and dad to have both of them over together, but they wouldn't even let him tell them about Kenny.

Kenny says, "It's going to take some time. It did with my folks."

"I don't think so," I say to Kenny. "Not the way my dad was last night with his veins popping and all. My dad said that Chazz has to get it out of his head or he can't ever come back. And Chazz, I think that's what you better do, too."

I look at Chazz, and he's just standing there looking back at me. He looks at me a long time,

and I start to feel real funny. But then Kenny says something to me. “Hey, Dillon, look over here.” I look to see, and he’s got my baseball glove and he’s trying to put it on his left hand. This makes me laugh because first of all, it’s way too small for his hand, but mainly because it’s a left-hander’s glove and it’s supposed to go on his right hand. I’m thinking that maybe Kenny is not too smart, and maybe Chazz didn’t choose a very good partner. “Oh,” Kenny says, “wrong hand,” and he looks at Chazz and laughs, and then he looks at me kind of out of the corner of his eye. That’s what my Grammy Rose calls “giving me the fish-eye.”

“So you’re a southpaw, huh, Dillon?”

“Southpaw” is not a bad word. It’s just a funny way to say left-handed. I say, “Yeah.”

“But Chazz says you’re the pitcher. That must be hard to pitch with your left hand?”

This makes me laugh, too. “Not when you’re left-handed.”

“How long have you been left-handed?”

This makes me laugh again because I can see now that Kenny isn’t even as smart as I even

thought he was. “Dim-bulb” is what Chazz always calls a guy like Kenny, and that’s why I’m wondering even more why Chazz chose this dim-bulb for a partner. And as I’m laughing I look over at Chazz, but Chazz isn’t laughing. He’s just watching me still.

“I was *born* left-handed,” I say. “Or at least, I guess so. I was too young to remember.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kenny says. “I was born *right*-handed. How about you, Chazz?”

“Right-handed.”

“Yeah,” Kenny says. “Almost everybody is born right-handed, but how come you’re different, Dillon?”

“I don’t know. It’s just the way I am.”

“Chazz showed me a couple of your PantherBoy books, too. Pretty good. You drew all of those pictures with your left hand?”

“Sure.”

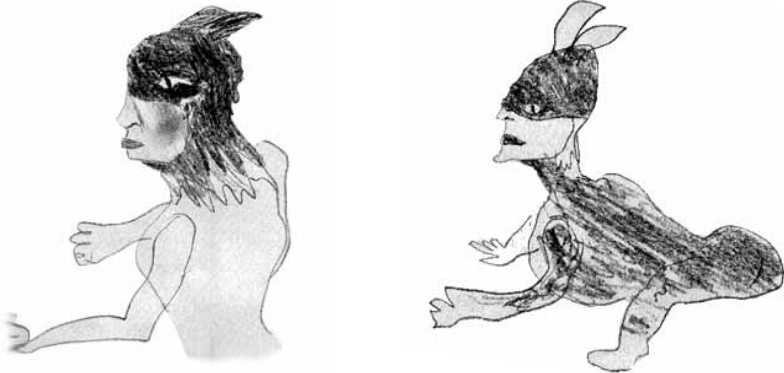
“So, what would you say if I tell you that you can’t do that anymore, draw with your left hand? What if I say you have to draw PantherBoy

with your right hand instead?”

“Well, but I can’t.”

“Sure you can.”

“But he wouldn’t be any good. He would look stupid.”



This is how PantherBoy looks when I try to draw him with my right hand. See? He looks stupid.

“No,” Kenny says. “I’ve made up my mind. From now on you’ve got to draw with your right hand, pitch with your right hand, write with your right hand.”

“Why?!?”

“Because I say so.”

“But that’s not fair!” Now I’m getting really mad. “And you can’t make me. It’s none of your business anyway.”

“What if I told you that unless you change to your right hand, you can’t ever come to see Chazz again? I won’t let you because I don’t like left-handed people.”

This is so mean that I look to Chazz, but Chazz is still just looking at me. He’s just looking at me and letting this guy Kenny say all these mean things to me. But then finally Chazz says to me, “Don’t you see what Kenny’s getting at, Dill? That’s what Mom and Dad are trying to do to me. They’re trying to tell me that I can’t see them again, or you again, unless I change to something that I’m not.”

And now something else clicks.

Chapter

5

Suddenly I remember something Grammy Rose told us, me and Chazz, one day when we were over at Grammy Rose's house helping her in her garden. I saw that she was doing everything with her left hand, same as me, and I said to her, "So, Grammy, you're left-handed, too?"

I didn't mean it like an insult or anything, because how can you insult somebody just because they're left-handed? Especially when you yourself are left-handed? But Grammy Rose sat back on her heels where she was setting these little plants into the soil, and she looked at me like it was something very serious. Then she told me this story about how when she was a kid her teacher

used to tie up her left hand in a fist, so she couldn't use her left hand for writing.

“No, Grammy!” I said. I really didn't believe her, that a teacher could be so mean to a kid.

“Oh, yes!” Grammy Rose said.



“And Miss Trudie didn't stop there, oh no, but she called my mama to the schoolhouse, your Great Grammy Grace, and Miss Trudie told my mama that she had to join in 'correcting' me, too. Just as soon as I got home from school every day, Mama was supposed to bind up my entire left arm behind my back,

bound to my waist with a cloth. Otherwise, Miss Trudie told my mama, I would continue in my ‘sinister’ ways.”

I didn’t know this until then, but left-handed people used to be called “sinister” which means evil. Miss Trudie calling Grammy Rose “sinister” makes me so mad that I could hop up and down on her pumpkin head. And Grammy Rose says that that word “sinister” comes from Latin which is a dead language, and the Italian word for “left” is still “sinistro” even today. And the Italians are, like, almost the same as the Latins, only the Italians are still alive, and the Latins are all dead. Or something. It’s real complicated, but it means a lot to people who speak English, which is my own language. And Chazz, who studied French at Hanover High—and I’m going to study French, too, when, or if, I ever get to Hanover High—told Grammy Rose and me that the French word for “left” is “gauche” which has an English meaning, too. In English, gauche is clumsy. Clumsy and evil. That’s what I’m supposed to be? And for all these wrong reasons, Miss Trudie tried to get my Great Grammy Grace to tie up my Grammy Rose, who was just a kid? If that doesn’t make you want

to hop up and down, then I don't know what.

I said, "But Great Grammy didn't do that to you, did she?"

"You bet she tried!" Grammy Rose said. "But it lasted only about two days. Mama wanted me to do everything around the house, all the sweeping and mopping, all the dishes, all the wood-chopping, all the ..." Grammy Rose is always interrupting herself, and then going right on but with different words. "Well, there wasn't anything she *didn't* want me to do, and how much of that can you do with one arm tied behind you, particularly when you didn't want to do it in the first place? And she couldn't very well spank me for *not* doing it right when she was the one who made me one-armed. So at home, no, that didn't last long."

"And did Miss Trudie give up, too?"

"You bet she didn't! That woman was one virago, and if you don't know what that means, then go look it up." Grammy Rose is always telling you to go look it up, and she's even got this dictionary and this encyclopedia that she keeps

handy for you. Chazz keeps telling her that he's going to teach her how to use the internet, and she keeps saying that she's going to learn, but that never happens. I looked it up later. Virago means termagant. Go look it up.

Anyway, for that whole year that she was her teacher, Miss Trudie kept Grammy Rose's left hand tied up and Grammy Rose was forced to learn to use her right hand for writing. And that's why Grammy Rose has terrible penmanship to this day. When Grammy Rose sends you a card, like for your birthday, you can hardly figure out a word of it. She laughs and says that it doesn't matter because nothing she writes is worth anything anyway, but I always think that everything Grammy Rose says or writes is special. I think Grammy Rose is the smartest person I know, even smarter than Ms. Peabody or Mrs. Whitehall, or any of the other teachers at the school. Maybe even smarter than Mary Moppin.

When Grammy Rose saw how mad I was at Miss Trudie—who was dead long ago and so I couldn't hop up and down on her head anyway unless I went over to the graveyard—

Grammy just laughed it off. She said, “Oh, don’t you worry about that, Dilly. That’s ancient history. That’s going almost as far back as the Trojan War. Miss Trudie didn’t know any better. She thought she was doing the right thing. So did Mama for that matter, and she thought she had failed me, and that I was forever doomed to threading a needle with my left hand, using my left eye. Her sinister baby girl was consigned to hell.”

“She didn’t believe that, Grammy,” I said, but I wasn’t so sure. Grammy Rose can sometimes tell whoppers, but usually she gives you the fish-eye when she does. That’s so you’ll know that it’s a funny lie, and not a bad lie.

“Well, maybe that’s going too far. But who’s to tell now? But don’t you worry, Dilly, no one is going to try to make *you* right-handed. We’re past *that* nonsense.”

And so that’s what clicks in my head when Chazz says that to me about how Dad and Mom want him to change or they will never see him again. See, Kenny didn’t really mean it with all that stuff about making me use my right hand for drawing PantherBoy, and for pitching. Kenny was

just trying to show me that that's wrong. And so now I say to Chazz and Kenny, "That's none of Dad's business, and none of Mom's business either. It's none of their business to try to change you like that. That's like what Miss Trudie did to Grammy Rose, just because she was different."

Chazz looks at me a second and then I can see the click in his own eyes. "You're right, Dill! I didn't think about Grammy Rose, but you're right. I'm like Grammy Rose. I'm like you. I'm just different in a different way."

I'm thinking about that. Chazz is different, and in a different way. So what's the big deal? I look at Kenny, and his eyebrows are in like these question marks, and he's grinning at me again and says to me, "So, am I still your friend?"

"Sure, but I'm not going to start drawing PantherBoy with my right hand just on your say-so." Kenny laughs, and I'm starting to think maybe he *is* smarter than I thought after all. But I'm still thinking about Mom and Dad, too. Mom and Dad still have it in their heads that Chazz has got to change. And so Chazz and I have got to change *them*.

I say, “So Chazz, what are we going to do about Mom and Dad?”



“Tell them to talk to Grammy Rose,” Kenny says and laughs again. “She sounds like she’d understand.”

“You know what?” Chazz says, but he’s not laughing. “Grammy Rose *would* understand.”

“It’s not funny, Kenny. I’ve got to go home to Mom and Dad, and they’re dropping Chazz out of the family, and what am I going to say to them?”

No one says anything. It's like I didn't even ask the question. I look at Chazz. He's looking at Kenny. I look at Kenny. He's looking at Chazz. I'm feeling like a ghost again. "I feel like a ghost," I say.

They both look at me. And then in a second Kenny says, "I've felt like that, Dillon. It's when people don't see you, right?"

"Yeah, and the silence, and how no one talks. Chazz is my brother, and he said he was living a lie, and all this time I didn't know him. So he was like a ghost to me, and I was like a ghost to him."

"You know me," Chazz says.

"Now I do."

"That's the whole point, Dill. That's it, right there. That's why I wanted to talk to you last night, and to Mom and Dad. Now you know me. And now we don't have to have silence anymore, you and me."

"Okay, then, but what are we going to do about Mom and Dad? They're still sitting there in all that silence. And I've got to go home to it."

Chazz thinks about it, then says, “Well, Dill, I guess that’s not anything *you* have to do anything about. I guess that’s up to me.”

I think about that. Then I say again, “But I’ve got to go home.”

“Yeah, you do,” Chazz says, “but you don’t need to fight my fights for me, Dill. Right?”

I say, “Call Grammy Rose.” Chazz looks at me like I’m crazy. You know that look? Big kids and parents and teachers give it to you all the same. It’s like you’re just a kid and don’t know anything. I say, “Call Grammy Rose. Kenny says she’ll understand. She’ll know what to do.”

Chazz looks at Kenny, and Kenny’s all watching me with those eyebrows in question marks again. So Chazz walks over to the phone.

“Grammy? It’s Chazz. What are you doing tonight?”

I’m thinking something’s about to click.

Chapter

6

Chazz and Kenny have to clean up and change clothes before they go see Grammy Rose, and so I use this time to bring my story up to date. I'm working on a picture of Kenny's fountain when Kenny comes up and looks over my shoulder. He smells clean.

"Wow, that's my fountain," he says. "Can I have that picture?"

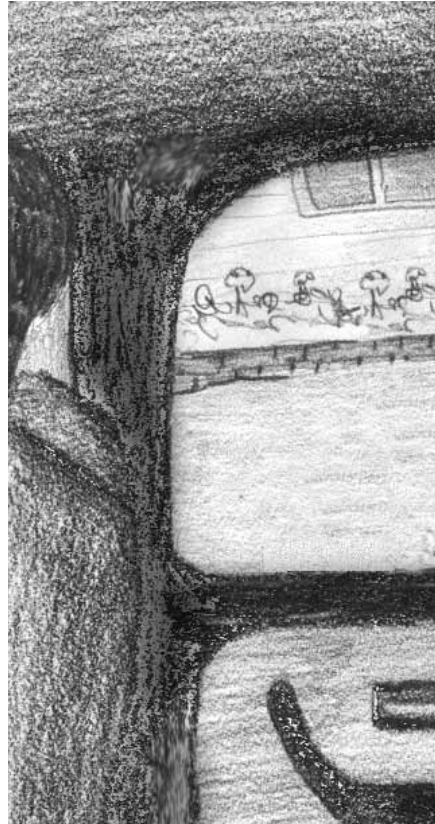
"This is for my story for Mrs. Whitehall," I tell him. "But I'll draw you another one."

"Great."

Now Chazz is ready, too, and we get into Chazz's car which is pretty beat up but way cool. Chazz always laughs and says that he's got it done up according to his exact specifications.

On the trip to Grammy Rose's we pass by my school and the kids are all getting out of baseball practice. I slide down in the backseat so no one can see me, but Chazz suddenly says, "Hey, Dill, is that Adam." And before I can say anything Chazz pulls over and says, "Hey, Ad-Dumb, want a ride?" Chazz is always calling Adam Ad-Dumb, and Adam is so dumb that he likes it. I think it's because Chazz is almost a man, but he's still a big kid, and Adam feels good to be playing with one of the big kids.

Before I can say anything, Adam is getting into the backseat with me and Chazz is



telling him Kenny's name, and all, and the car is back moving up the street.

"Sup?" Adam says to Kenny. "Sup?" he says to Chazz. But Adam doesn't even look at me.

Kenny's all sitting sideways in the front seat and looking back at me and Adam. I try looking out the window, but Kenny is even smarter than I was thinking before. He says, "So, what happened between the two of you? You're not talking?"

I say, "Nothing."

But Adam doesn't say anything. Kenny's eyebrows make those question marks, but he doesn't say anything. He just turns around in his seat.



Adam says to me, but he doesn't think anyone else can hear, "You fag!"

Man, the way Chazz stops that car, my dad would be yelling at him! There's this squeal of brakes and this jerk of the car as it pulls over to the curb and stops. Chazz turns around fast and looks at Adam like he's dog meat in his backseat. "What did you say?"

"Well, he is!" Adam says, and I can tell that he's scared and ready to cry, like playing with the big kids isn't so great any more. "He picked a fight with me today!"

"But why did you call him that?" Chazz says, and he's got his arm up on the back of the seat and I'm thinking he might even smack Adam backhand or something, even though I've never seen Chazz do anything mean like that to a little kid.

"Because he picked a fight with me! He pushed me down and I almost hit my head, and he *is* a fag!" Now Adam's just sitting there kind of shaking.

I can see Chazz can't figure it out, and I say to Chazz, "He doesn't know. Adam doesn't know

what he's saying. He's just a kid."

"Wait a second, Chazz," Kenny says, and he turns all the way around and puts his own hand across the back of the seat, up on top of Chazz's arm, like in case Chazz does start backhanding Adam, Kenny can stop him. That makes me feel a little better, even though I don't think Chazz ever would. Then Kenny says to Adam, "Do you know what that word means, Adam?"

Adam thinks about it and says, "Yeah?" but there's this kind of question mark in his voice like maybe he doesn't really know, after all.

"Do you know it's a dirty word?" Kenny asks him.

"No, it's not. It's just what you call kids when they act stupid, like Dillon."

"Well, trust me, Adam. It's a dirty word. Don't use it unless you mean it. And if you mean it, you better be ready to fight. You got that?" Kenny's so cool the way he's just looking at Adam, making no big thing about it, but just telling it the way it is.

"Okay," Adam says, and now I'm feeling a

little better again.

But only a little and only for a second because now Chazz turns all the way around in his seat to look at me, sitting behind him. He says, “You pushed Adam down?”

“Well, he called Joey Blinder a fag!” Chazz looks like he doesn’t understand. I say, “Well, you know what you told me last night! You said if a kid calls you a fag, I’m supposed to fight.”

Kenny looks surprised at Chazz. “You told him that?”

Chazz looks surprised at me. “I told you that?”

“Well...” I say, but I just can’t remember it right. “Rumble was scratching all over me, and you were outside my door and yelling about the kids on the playground calling each other fag, and how I’m supposed to stop it.”

“Well, Dill...” Chazz says, and I can see from his eyes that nothing is clicking in his head. “I don’t know what I said, but I didn’t mean that. You can’t change the other kids. I guess I just

meant that I know you kids are always calling each other fag, and saying, ‘Oh, that’s so gay!’ and making all these put-downs of gay people. I don’t want *you* to do that, Dill.”

“Are you gay?” This is Adam’s voice, coming from next to me on the backseat. And I look over, and if he looked scared before, now he looks like he’s going to wet his pants. He’s looking from Chazz to Kenny like, in the movies, the prey looks just before the predator pounces. I’m thinking I’m going to draw that look for my next PantherBoy.



Chazz is looking like he doesn't have an answer in his head. That's a good look, too, but I don't think I can draw well enough yet to capture the physiognomy of it.

It's Kenny who gives the answer, and it's just like he was talking before, nice and quiet and straight at you. "You know, Adam, I don't think that's a question you should be asking people. If they want you to know, they'll tell you. Okay?"

"Okay," Adam says, but he doesn't look okay.

"Okay," Chazz says, and he turns around and starts the car moving again. "You two just go back to being friends now, okay?"

I'm not so sure, but I say, "Okay." I look over at Adam, and he's looking at me like he doesn't like what he sees. I say, "Sorry I pushed you."

He says, "That's okay." He waits a second and then says, "It didn't hurt, you know." But I know that it did. "You just took me by surprise, you know. Otherwise..." and he shows me with his fist how he would beat me up. That just makes me laugh.





Chazz pulls up to Adam's house, and Adam gets out and walks up the walk like he's real cool, like some big man in high school or something.

"So-o-o ba-a-a-a-d!" Kenny says in a whisper to Chazz and gives a little laugh. Adam can't hear that, but something makes him stop just before his door and turn around and yell at us, in this really mean voice, "Why don't you run away to San Francisco and get married, faggots!" And then he runs into his house.

Chazz doesn't say anything. He just puts the car into gear and goes.

Chapter

7

Grammy Rose is waiting for us on her swing on the front porch. Whenever you tell Grammy Rose you're coming over, she always waits for you on her swing on the front porch. She gets up and waves. Chazz introduces her to Kenny.

“So you're the face behind the voice on the phone at Chazz's place. Well, Kenny, don't you think it's about time we met?”

Grammy Rose always makes you feel like you're responsible for everything, only she doesn't hold it against you. It's like everything is a joke with Grammy Rose. Only now when she turns to me, maybe it's not so much like a joke because she says, “And you had to sit in the Principal's Office

today, Dilly? And you cut baseball practice? Is this a new habit, being bad? Is this an activity that you are cultivating, that you should get in trouble twice in one day?"

I say, "Who told you that?"

"And just who do you think? Do you want to get in there and call your mother? She's worried sick about you." But before I can say anything, Grammy Rose takes off again, like she does. "Well, no you don't, as a matter of fact, because I just talked to her on the phone, and I told her that Chazz called and you were coming over here for dinner, and so you are, all three of you, and I'm not going to take no for an answer because I intend to get to the bottom of everything, and as for you, Dilly, answer my question, did you lie to the coach?"

"No!" And that's the truth, as I said before. "I told the coach that Chazz has an emergency, and he does, don't you, Chazz?"

Grammy Rose does this thing where she turns from one person to the next like she is a spotlight. That's how she turns to Chazz.



Grammy Rose, turning on her spotlight.



*Chazz, in Grammy Rose's spotlight.
Notice the same scared prey physiognomy that Adam had.*

“Yeah, I guess that’s not a lie,” Chazz says.

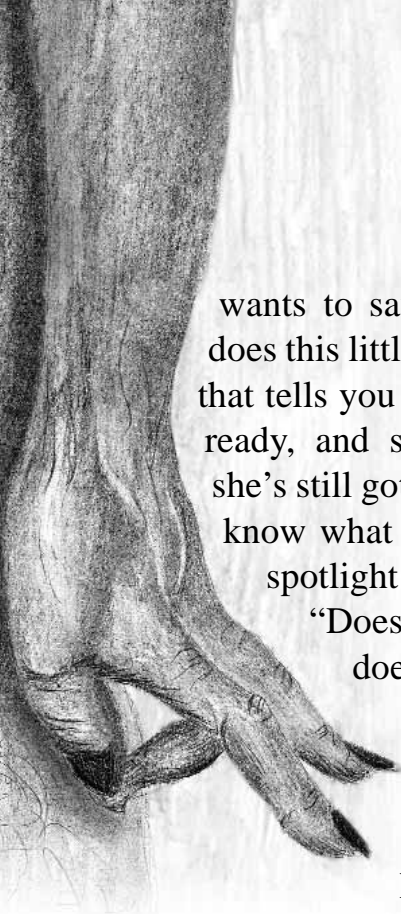
“An emergency?” Grammy Rose turns her spotlight from Chazz to Kenny. Kenny looks at her a second, then he shrugs his shoulders and puts his eyebrows into the question marks, and Grammy Rose says, “Uh huh.” When Grammy Rose says “uh huh” like that, it doesn’t mean that she agrees, but it doesn’t mean that she disagrees, either. It just sort of means, “Tell me more.” But this can be a trap, too, and so you don’t want to say too much, if you can get away with it. Kenny seems to know this already about Grammy Rose because he doesn’t say anything at all. So Grammy turns her spotlight back on Chazz. “You were at your mama’s and daddy’s last night, Chazzy?”

“Yeah.”

“And ... words were spoken?” She turns her spotlight on me. “Dillon, what do you know?”

“Nothing.”

“That is not very encouraging.” She keeps looking at me for a long time. I can see out of the corner of my eye that Chazz is moving in like he



wants to say something, but Grammy Rose does this little thing with her fingers at her side that tells you not to speak until she's good and ready, and she's not good and ready while she's still got me on the spot. But since I don't know what to say next, she finally turns the spotlight back on Chazz again and says, "Does Dilly know? I think he does, doesn't he? About you and Kenny?"

"So *you* know, Grammy?"

"Well, of course, honey," Grammy Rose says. "But does Dilly know?"

"I think he does. We've talked about it."

"Kenny?" and Grammy Rose spotlights Kenny, who's still got his eyebrows in the question marks.

"Seems like he's got the essentials of it, all right."

"You mean about Chazz being gay, and Kenny's his partner? Sure, I know all about that. But how do *you* know, Grammy Rose?"

I know that Mom didn't tell you, because she doesn't even believe it."

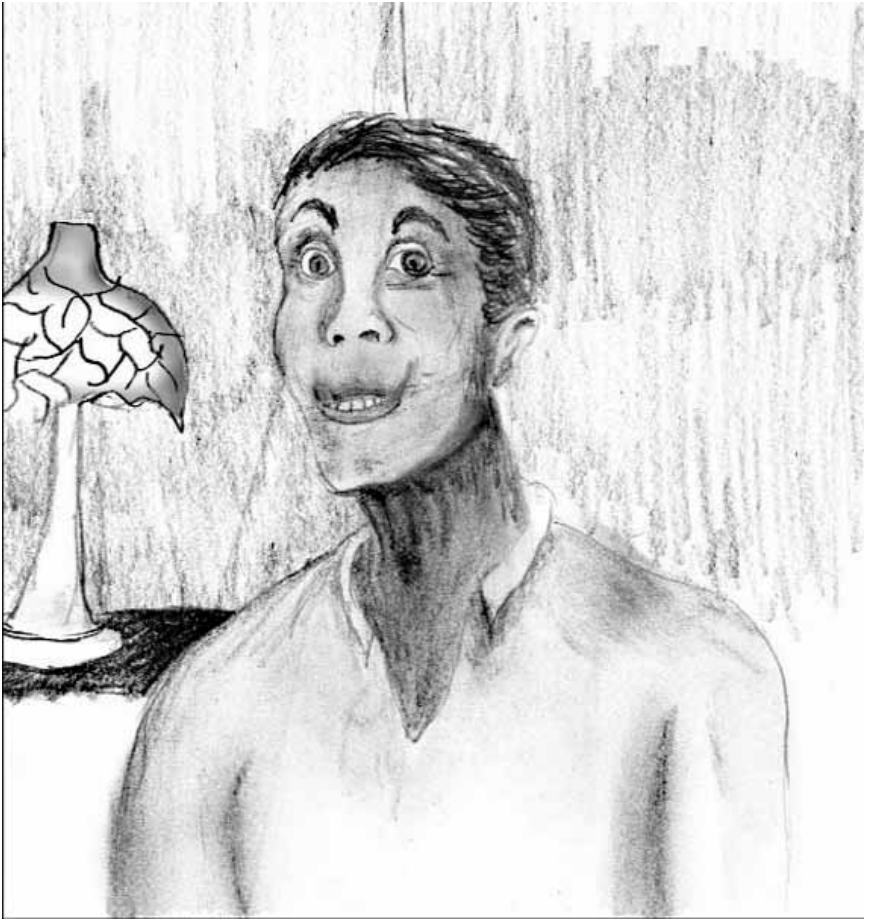
"Oh, she believes it, honey. She just doesn't *want* to believe it. But no, to answer your question, your mother did not tell me that. That's just something I've known for a long time. I've just been waiting for Chazzy to find it out for himself." And she pulls Chazz over to her by his neck and gives him a kiss on his forehead.

"I've known since the second grade, Grammy," Chazz says. "I just didn't know what it was."

"I wondered if that was true. Well," Grammy Rose says, and she looks at me and then says, "this is a conversation we'd best finish up away from the little pitcher with the big ears." When she says this, I know she means me. "Dilly, I guess you have some homework to do? You go into the dining room to the table there and start working on it. Chazzy, you and Kenny come into the kitchen and help me finish up dinner."

"Can't I come?" I say, but Grammy Rose turns her spotlight on me, and then pushes Kenny ahead of her through the door.

Chazz gives me a look with his eyes wide open and his lips pulled up at the corners like he does sometimes when he knows something big is going to happen, but he doesn't know if it's good or bad.



Chapter

8

So I've pulled my story out of my portfolio and I'm bringing it up to date, and I get kind of lost in it. I don't know how long it is before Grammy Rose comes into the dining room and starts setting the table, and Chazz and Kenny come with the food. And now I'm eating Grammy Rose's food, which my dad always says is the best cooking in town and how my mom learned everything she knows in the kitchen at my Grammy Rose's side. And I can tell that Grammy Rose and Chazz and Kenny have been talking all about *it* in the kitchen. *It* is the thing, the thing with Chazz that's causing all the problems with my mom and my dad.

Grammy Rose is doing all the talking.

She always does that. First she gets you to say everything she wants you to say, and then she ends up saying everything she wants to say, and that's always a lot. My dad says that once Grammy Rose starts talking, you can't get a word in edgeways. I always think that's funny, because I picture in my mind saying a word edgeways out of my mouth, and then that edgeways word getting gobbled up by all of Grammy Rose's words jumping out of her mouth, like a computer attack game.

“Well, all right, Chazz,” Grammy Rose is saying, “I understand what you've done, trying to speak to your family about this, and why you've done it. But this plan of yours to tell your Grandma and Grandpa Moore, now why in the world would you want to go and do a thing like that?”

Chazz starts to answer her, but Grammy Rose won't even let any edgeways words out at the moment. “What would be the *good* in it, Chazzy? And what would be the bad? I want you to think hard about that. Now it's one thing for you to come to your Grammy Rose. That's appropriate. And your Gramp Al, if he were only still with us—

rest that dear soul of that good man—would just eat you and Kenny up with sugar. He would be so thrilled at this young man you've brought into this family! But your Grandma and Grandpa Moore, honey? That would not be appropriate. They just don't have the same..." and here Grammy Rose took a second and looked in her head for the word, "...outlook ... honey, on life. And that may be part of why your daddy exploded like a cherry bomb. And your mama, well, as you have seen and as you might have *foreseen*, sometimes she's got more grits in her than good sense. And over *this* now, she's going to have to take a little time to drain the mush. But listen, this is what I want you to know about that, and here's the truth of it."

Grammy Rose takes a big breath here, but she doesn't really need it because, as my dad says, Grammy Rose can talk like she's playing a harmonica, on breath going in just the same as on breath going out. No, this breath she takes now is to punch up her next word, and that word is ...

"*Love*," Grammy Rose says, "comes where and how and with whomsoever you find it, and there's nothing much anyone can do to stop it."

As your mother should well know, since she fell in love with your father which, believe me, your Gramp Al didn't agree with at all, at all, at *all* ... at first. Yet, look what a fine man, husband and father Chaswick Moore is this day. And Gramp Al was wrong. Al Dillon was wrong, I'll say it again! As *he* should well have known since he himself had to fight like the dickens to get *me* away from *my* mother, your Great Grammy Grace, who should have known better *herself* since *her* own mother, your Great Great Grammy Viola Franklin Hayes, had to fight *Mama* like the dickens to try to separate *Mama* from the true love of *Mama's* life, who in fact did become my father, thank you very much. And that was your Great Gramp Grover, and *there* was a man for you! Never so much as..."

And here Grammy Rose interrupts herself because she was about to "undertake a digression" as she calls it, and she takes another one of those breaths that she doesn't need but only uses to impress you, and says again, "*Love!*" like that was where she was always headed. "And that's just how love is. Love always wins out when the people are good in their hearts. And all it takes is one

look at Kenny here to know that he's as good as gold in his heart, even though I just met him hardly more than an hour ago. And I do know *this* much anyway, what would my Chazzy be doing with someone who wasn't pure gold? And as for your mama and daddy, well that's just a matter of time because although gold melts and changes its shape, it never goes away, and that's why people treasure it so."

Grammy Rose looks like when she's just finished sewing on a button, like a job that had to be done is done, and well done. I look to Chazz to see if he's going to talk now, but he's just nodding his head. And so Grammy Rose takes out another button. "But Chazzy, you didn't come here tonight to ask me to fight your fights for you with your folks, did you?"

I say fast to Grammy, "He told *me* he didn't want *me* to fight his fights."

Chazz says, "I don't want anyone fighting my fights, Grammy. But I just don't see why it has to *be* a fight."

"Oh, it's going to be a fight all right, Chazz. But Dilly, Chazz is right, honey. A person's got to

fight his own fights in a person's own way. No, Chazz, I don't intend to fight your fight, or pick sides here, but I *will* promise you all something. If your mama and daddy come to me asking for advice—and I'm not saying they will, but if they do come—it'll be your mama first, and you know the way she respects my opinion..." And Grammy Rose stops a second and looks at me. "She does respect my opinion, doesn't she?" I'm wondering what I should answer to this because of some of the things I've heard my mom say about her mom, but Grammy Rose looks like she thinks better of the question and goes right on. "Well, never mind. You can be sure what I'll tell them. And here's something else, I guess it's about time to bring your Great Uncle Marty out of the closet."

Chazz turns more than his head to look at Grammy Rose. He turns his whole body in his chair. "Is that the one...?" Chazz starts to say, but he stops.

"Yes, that's the one. That *is* the one. That's the one no one ever talks about. And I loved Marty so. For me it's the loss. That's why I never want to talk about him. But for everyone else, it

was the other thing, it was the shame. Yes, what a shame. Shame on *them*.” Grammy Rose looks like she looked one time when she took a drink of milk that had gone sour in her refrigerator. Then she says, “Now, Dilly, I’ll bet you can recite the names of all my brothers and sisters, can’t you, even though you never even met a one of them?”

I can. That’s because my mom has told so many stories about them, and she has pointed out where they lived around town, and sometimes we’ve gone to visit her cousins, even though they’re a lot older than she is. I say, “First there was Frank, then Ella, then Daisy, then Gobe.”

“Yes, and you’ve heard stories about all of them, I know, and I could tell you a lot more, and maybe they wouldn’t appear to be angels, all of them. Those first four were all about two years apart, like Mama and Dad had measured them out with a ruler of time. But then I guess Mama and Dad learned their lesson because that was the end of their kids for about ten years. But then they had Martin.

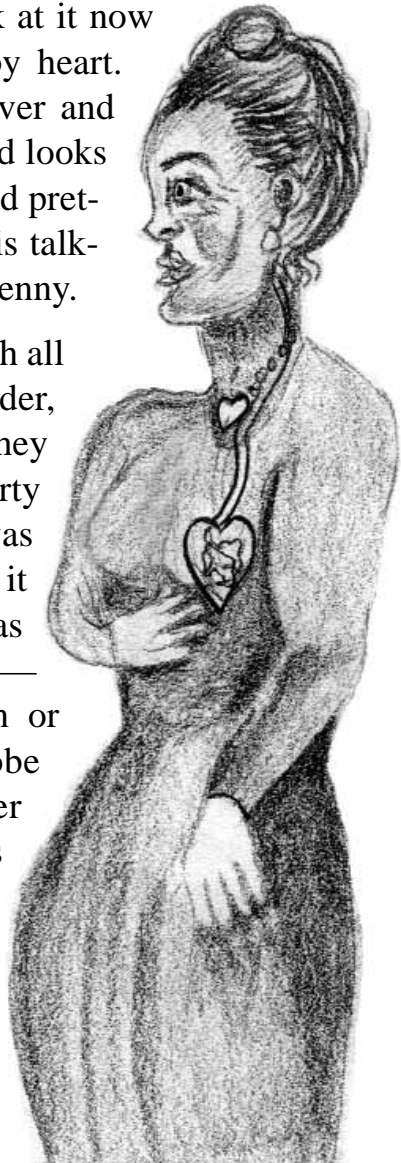
And then they measured out another two years and they brought me into this world. People used to have lots bigger families than they do now. And that made a lot of sense because so many died so young in those days, and if you wanted to keep the population up, it was your duty to have at least three or four kids because one or two were sure to die. But I'm undertaking a digression here, and you boys should do a better job of keeping me on track. Kenny, where was I?"

"And then along came Rose."

"Yes, and then along came Rose," Grammy Rose says, and she kind of laughs at that, and she gets up and goes over to the hutch and opens a drawer and she takes out a handkerchief. But she keeps talking all the time and she tells us all about Great Uncle Marty, all the time wiping at her eyes with the hanky. Grammy Rose has all the pictures of the family on the same wall in the dining room where the hutch is, and she points to the one that's got her whole family, Great Grammy Grace and Great Gramp Grover and all Grammy Rose's brothers and sisters. Grammy Rose is the smallest, and it's the kid standing next to her, who's just a

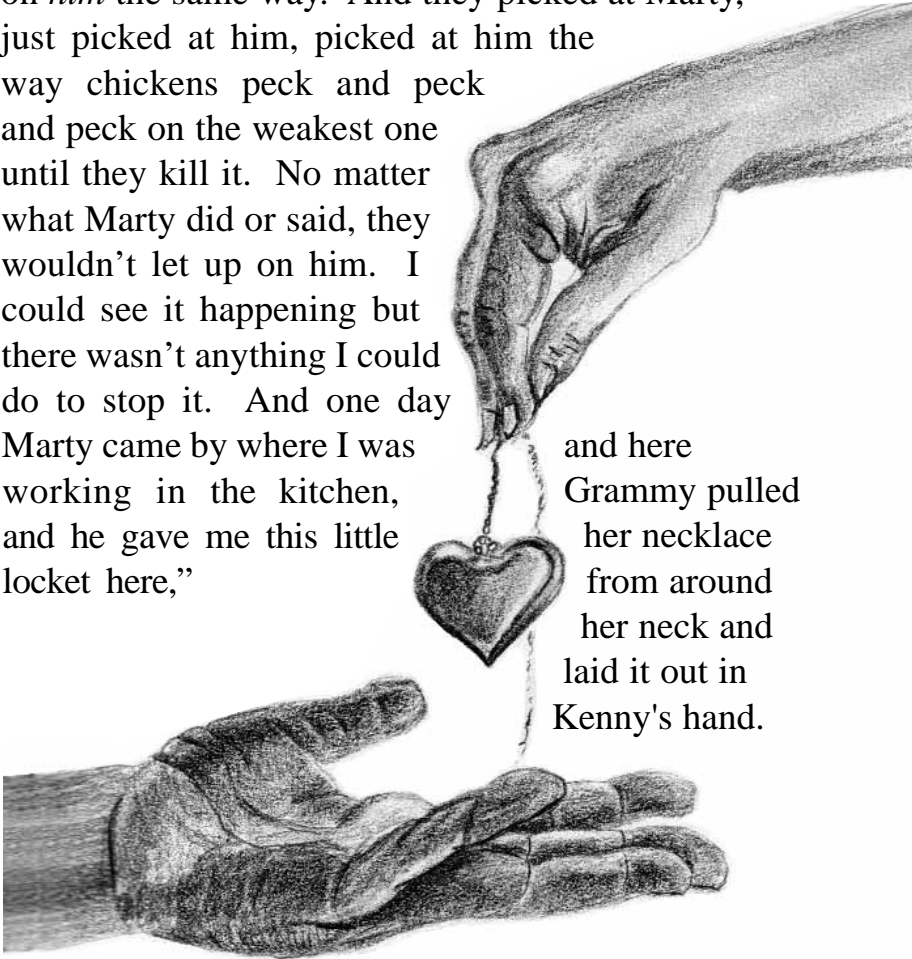
little bigger than she is that she keeps pointing at. That's Marty. I've looked at that picture before, and I don't have to look at it now to know every face on there by heart. But Kenny gets up and goes over and stands next to Grammy Rose and looks at the picture while she talks, and pretty soon it's like Grammy Rose is talking to no one in the room but Kenny.

“Being so close in age with all the rest of them so much older, Marty and I were, oh, what do they call it now ... soul mates. Marty and I were soul mates. He was always taking care of me. Well, it must have been when Marty was around fifteen or sixteen—I know because I was thirteen or fourteen—that Frank and Gobe caught Marty with this other young fellow. Abe Crown was his name.

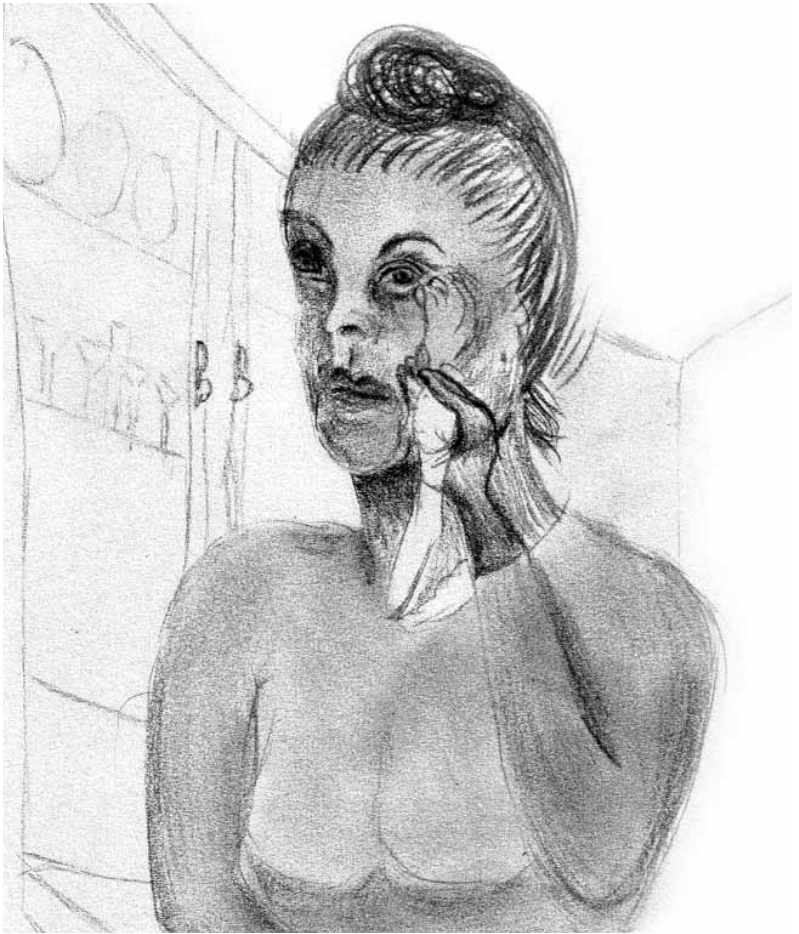


Abe lived just down the road from us. And my family turned on Marty like hounds on a rabbit, Mama at the head of the pack because Dad was dead by this time. And I guess Abe's family turned on *him* the same way. And they picked at Marty, just picked at him, picked at him the way chickens peck and peck and peck on the weakest one until they kill it. No matter what Marty did or said, they wouldn't let up on him. I could see it happening but there wasn't anything I could do to stop it. And one day Marty came by where I was working in the kitchen, and he gave me this little locket here,"

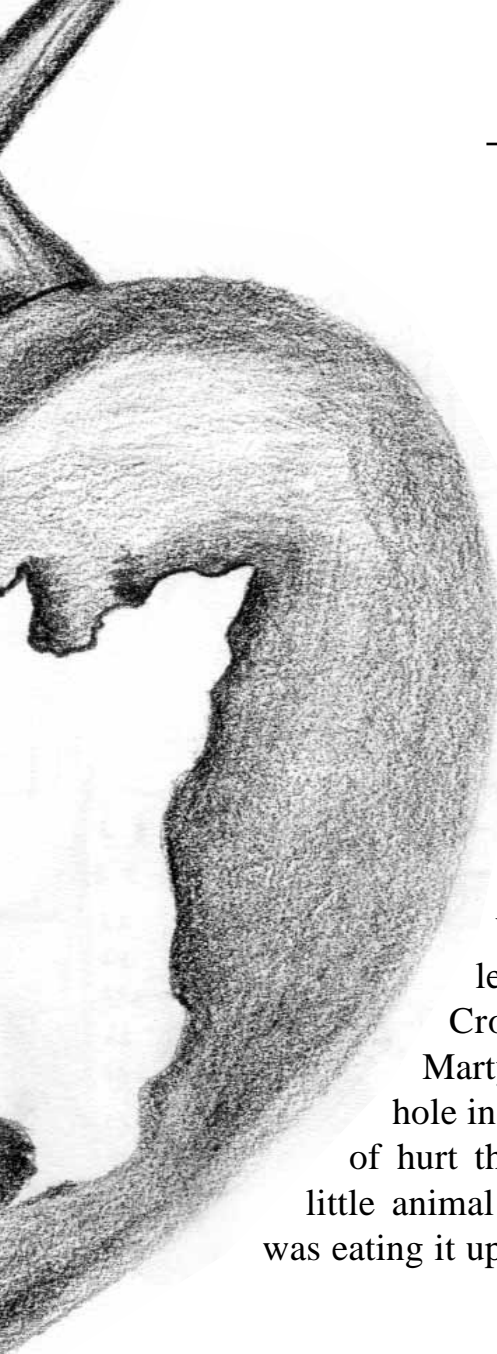
and here
Grammy pulled
her necklace
from around
her neck and
laid it in
Kenny's hand.



“Because it was Valentine’s Day, you see, and it’s in the shape of a heart.” And here she starts to wipe her eyes again with the hanky, but then she holds it over both eyes with her whole hand.







“And it was that day, Valentine’s Day, that Marty left us forever. With Abe Crown. And I never saw Marty again. And there was a hole in my heart so big and so full of hurt that you’d think some wild little animal had crawled in there and was eating it up from the inside.”

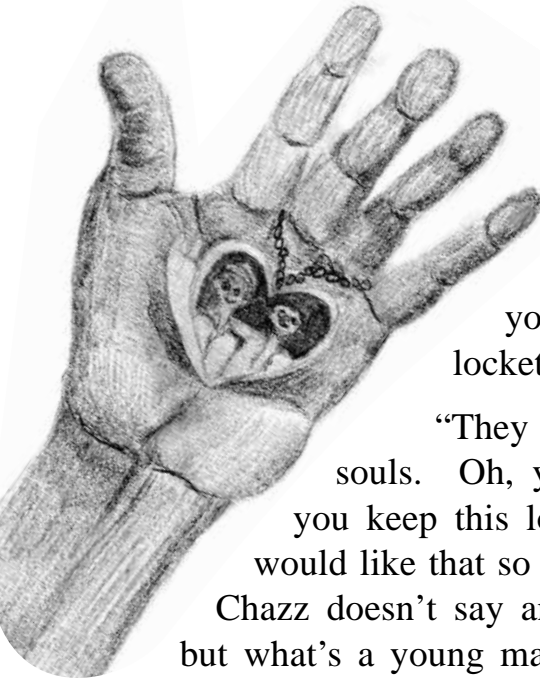
None of us can say anything because Grammy Rose is really crying now, covering her face with one hand and grabbing at her heart with the other one. I've never seen my Grammy Rose cry. And I've never seen any grown-up cry this hard. And it pinches my own heart so that it hurts like a pain, and almost like Grammy Rose said, like something is eating it up from inside. I look at Chazz and he's the same way.

Pretty soon, though, Grammy Rose wipes her eyes again, one last time, and stuffs the hanky in her pocket and reaches over to take the locket back from Kenny. But before she can put it around her neck again, Chazz asks to see it. She brings it to him. It looks like it's hard for her to walk, and when she gets to the table where Chazz is, she sits down and hands him the locket. I've seen this locket on her neck all my life, but I never knew there was a story about it. It's like Grammy Rose was keeping it a secret. It's like Grammy Rose has always been a ghost in silence, too.

As Chazz opens up the locket Grammy Rose says, "That's a picture of Marty and Abe. Aren't they lovely?"

“Real good looking,” Chazz says.

“Both of them,” Kenny says, looking over Chazz’s shoulder.



I look, too, and I say, “This one on the left is Marty.” I can recognize his face from the picture on the wall, even though he was much younger then. But in the locket, he still looks like a kid.

“They were both just lovely souls. Oh, you know what, honey, you keep this locket. I believe Marty would like that so much.” But seeing that Chazz doesn’t say anything, she says, “Oh, but what’s a young man like you going to do with a locket on a chain. I guess I’ll just keep it,” and she reaches for it again.

Chazz says, “I’ve got a box where I keep things like this. I could keep the locket in that box.”

“Well, then, that’s ... lovely,” Grammy Rose says and she hands the locket back to Chazz. But she doesn’t let go of the chain right away. So I know this is hard for her. But she does, in the end, give the locket to Chazz.

You know how sometimes things get embarrassing? That’s what happens now. Nobody knows what to say next. And then Kenny says, “Dillon, why don’t you read us your story? Chazz and I will take care of the dishes, and Grammy you just sit back and take it easy. Okay, Dillon?”

Chapter

9

I'm used to reading Chazz my stories about PantherBoy because he kind of helped me invent PantherBoy. But I've never read for Grammy Rose before, and sure thing I never read for Kenny. And now he's the one who's asking me to read. I don't know that I want to, but before I can think much about it, we're all in the kitchen and Kenny is washing the dishes and Chazz is drying them and Grammy Rose is on the other side of the table waiting for me to start. She starts looking at the pictures before I'm ready for her to, and I have to tell her that they're not finished yet. Some of the pictures I want to fill in better, and some are just ideas, just sketches out of my head and maybe I

won't even finish them, but I don't even know yet. She says that's okay. And I tell all three of them that I want to go back later and get the words better, too. I think I can get the words just right if I work at it. They all say okay, and I start reading.

It doesn't take long to read all that I've got so far because I don't have the stuff about Marty in yet, even though I know for sure that I want to put that in. I'll do that later.

When I get to the last words, I look up from the page. That's where I write, "Chazz gives me a look with his eyes wide open and his lips pulled up at the corners like he does sometimes when he knows something big is going to happen, but he doesn't know if it's good or bad." That's as far as I got in my last update. Chazz and Kenny are leaning against the counter now, just watching me. Chazz has got exactly that same look on his face right now. Kenny's got his eyebrows in the question marks again. Grammy Rose is watching me, too. Her mouth is kind of open like she's waiting for the next word. But nobody says the next word. Not for a long time.

Then finally Grammy Rose says, "Dilly?"

You're intending to hand that story in to Mrs. Whitehall tomorrow?"

I look at Chazz, who's still not saying a word, but I can tell he wants to. "I don't know," I say. "I'm thinking now that maybe I shouldn't. I'm thinking now that I could write another story about family, and hand that story in instead. I could write about Rumble. Rumble is part of the family, too. I could just use the part where I tell how you gave Rumble to Chazz on the day that I was born. And I could use that Rumble picture for that story?"

I leave that as a question.

Grammy Rose says, "Well, that might be a good idea, Dilly." Chazz nods his head and looks at Kenny. Kenny nods his head, too.

"That would be appropriate, wouldn't it?" I say.

"Yes," Grammy Rose says. "That's exactly the word I would use for that. But I want you to know that I really like this story here, too, Dilly."

"Yeah, it's a good story, Dill," Chazz says, and Kenny keeps nodding his head. "You should

keep working on it, just like you're doing. And we'll keep it in the family. And share it with people who can understand it. I think Grammy Rose is right about that." Kenny keeps nodding. Chazz looks at him. "Right, Kenny?"

"Yep, I think that's what I would do."

And all three of them keep nodding their heads up and down, and so do I. And I start to put my story back in the portfolio, always the pictures first, so that I can make good and sure there aren't any folds or wrinkles. And then I say, "Well, you know, Mom and Dad are waiting for me. So I've got to go home pretty soon."

They keep nodding their heads.

"I could walk home from here."

Nobody says anything.

"Or maybe, Chazz, maybe you could drive me home? Maybe you and Kenny? If you wanted to? You don't have to come inside. I could get out in front of the house. Mom and Dad might be watching out the window? They might see you? That would be okay with me. Would that be okay with you?"

Chazz looks at Kenny. “That’s okay with me. Is that okay with you, Kenny?”

“Sure.”

“Grammy Rose? You could call them and tell them that I’m coming home? That Chazz is giving me a ride, and I’ll be with Chazz in his car? So they would know?”

“Yes, honey, that’s a thing I could do.”

Everyone’s nodding again, and I nod, too, right along with them.

“So, whenever you’re ready, Dill,” Chazz says.

“Okay,” I say. “I guess I’m ready.”

That’s when the phone rings, and Grammy Rose picks it up. She says hello and listens a second then says, “Well, how fast do you think we can move, Linda? We’ve got to make the dinner, we’ve got to eat the dinner, and then there’s always talk. People do talk you know.”

She looks at me a second, then says, “Yes, of course we talked about that. Sounds like you made a real mess in your kitchen last night.”

When Chazz and Kenny laugh at that, Grammy Rose just gives them a wink. She says into the phone, “Umhmm,” then again, “Umhmm.” Then she says, “Yes, he’s just packed up and he *says* he’s ready. Oh, and Linda, Dilly wants me to tell you that he’ll be coming with Chazzy, in Chazzy’s so-called automobile. They’ll be together, he says to tell you.”

The she listens again and says, “Umhmm. And what about Chazzy? You want to talk to him?” She looks at Chazz and Chazz nods his head yes at her. Kenny doesn’t look so sure though. “Is that what you want me to tell him? Those exact words?” She listens a second, then says, “Okay, I’ll tell them both. See you tomorrow.”

And Grammy Rose hangs up. “Chazzy, your mom says she does want to talk to you. But not yet.”

Chazz doesn’t say anything, and so I say, “That’s good, isn’t it, Grammy?”

“You bet,” Grammy Rose says. “And Dilly, she says to tell *you* she’ll be waiting for you on the front porch.”

“Then she’s sure to see Chazz and Kenny if they drive me home.”

“I’d say so.”

Kenny starts to say something here. “Maybe ... I’d better ... not ... ”

“No way!” Chazz says, “I think you’d just better!”

“I’d say so,” Grammy Rose says quietly.

“And maybe Dad would be with her, waiting on the front porch.”

“Maybe.”

I think about this. I really think about this. “Okay, then. Okay. Then yes. I *am* ready.”

THE END



ERRATA

One of the really cool things you can do when you make a book is to add pages at the end of it, if you want to. My Grammy Rose taught me this, and even Chazz didn't know about it until she told us. See, the way it happened was that Grammy Rose was doing what they call “proofreading” the book. That's what they do after the author writes it, and after the editor edits it, and the author rewrites it (again and again and again). Then the proofreader comes in and proofs it to make sure there aren't any typos or other kinds of mistakes. Grammy Rose found some of these other kinds of mistakes, and she was hopping mad at Chazz because she knew that Chazz had already seen these mistakes but wasn't doing anything about them. But Chazz said that as editor—which is what he calls himself because he helped me a little, or maybe a little bit more than a little—that he was responsible for making sure that his author's voice was true. That's me, the author, and my “voice” is the way I use my words when I write. Chazz told Grammy Rose that those mistakes were part of my voice, and we had to leave them just as they were. But Grammy Rose said

that we couldn't leave mistakes in the book. But then she thought a second and said, "A rattum page, Dilly! That's what you need!"



Well, by this time, with both of them talking about all these so-called "mistakes" I had made in the book, I went straight to the dictionary to look up "rattum" because I didn't trust either Grammy Rose or Chazz as far as I could pick them up and throw them. When Grammy Rose saw me looking through the R section of the dictionary for "rattum" she laughed her pumpkin head off, and told Chazz about it, who laughed his own pumpkin head off. That's when Grammy Rose told me what "irony" is. (Look it up.)

Chazz was already on the computer and making the Erratum page, only because there was more than one erratum, he typed it “Errata” which is Latin for errors. And here they are:

- P. 4 - Then Grandma Moore tells my dad that his “wife’s mother” shouldn’t be lording it over the angels because the angels have “ways mysterious” of reeking revenge.

(Should be “wreaking” revenge. How was I supposed to know that?)

- P. 4 - And Grandpa Moore says that Chazz is “no better nor no worse” than any of God’s beans...

(Should be “beings” which I would have known if I had thought about it.)

- P. 44 - Chazz says they call these dot dot dots “lipsies”...

(Should be “elipses” and this one makes me really mad because Chazz should have corrected me when he first told me about it instead of laughing at my mistake behind my back, even though it is kind of funny.)

ADDENDUM

You can also put in an Addendum page if you want, which means something that is added on. Or if you have more than one Addendum, then you say “Addenda” because that's how the Latins do it, and they invented it. My addendum is this picture (see over!) of my family at next Sunday dinner, even though it hasn't happened yet, and may never even happen, especially if I want to include Grandma and Grandpa Moore. But as Grammy Rose told me, “A guy can dream, can't he?”

