

Sin & Contrition

Part One

Early Teens

Chapter One

The Slingshot Affair

'It's hard to tell', LaMarr thought, *'what angle I should fire the shot. Can't see the road. Not really sure how far it is. Maybe about like this.'* He drew back the small leather patch which was attached to the arms of the slingshot by strong rubber bands, and extending his left arm upwards at an angle, he released the shot. He could not see it, but he heard the marble pass through the leaves of the trees overhead. He waited, listening for the marble to strike.

Gary released his shot, and turned to him briefly: "Come on, LaMarr! Go again! What are you waiting for?"

"Well, I want to hear where it landed. That way I can correct the next shot."

Gene, who completed the trio of friends, said laconically: "If you don't hear anything, what will that tell you, LaMarr? It may be too short or too long. You gotta keep trying."

LaMarr gave a shrug of acceptance and reached into his pocket for another marble.

"OK, guys, let's fire a salvo together," Gary directed, "I figure the angle is about like this," and he demonstrated while looking at the other two.

Gene interrupted, "you're too far to the left. It's more like this," and he demonstrated with a gesture of his shoulders.

"Three, two, one, shoot!" Gary commanded, releasing his shot. The snap of the three slingshots sounded almost simultaneously.

"Oh shit! I must have shot the red one," Gene lamented, reviewing a handful of marbles. "I wanted to keep that one."

Gary shrugged, and offered his friend a 'tough luck' look. In the distance there was the sound of something striking metal.

Gene looked wide-eyed at the other two: "did you hear that? I bet we got a car!"

"Another salvo, as before, guys," Gary commanded, and the snap of the slingshots sounded again.

In the distance, there was a male voice shouting: “hey, what the hell’s going on? This girl’s been hurt! . . . Call an ambulance!”

“Holy shit! Did you hear that? We must have hit someone!” LaMarr stared at his friends: “What’ll we do?”

Gary tucked his slingshot into the back pocket of his jeans, but his resolute expression had dissolved into bravado: “it’s probably nothing . . . but we ought’a to move along.”

LaMarr grabbed his departing friend by the sleeve: “but, Gary, maybe it is something to worry about. They’re calling an ambulance.”

“Take it easy, LaMarr. Let’s go to the fort. Are you coming, Gene?”

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

Gary tried to collect his thoughts: *‘OK, relax. Nothing to worry about. We’ll get to the fort and I’ll figure something out.’*

For Gary, aged thirteen, the fort represented a place to hide from the world, a place of safety. He, Gene and LaMarr had built it two years previously out of weathered planking they had ‘borrowed’ from a construction site in the industrial park. There was room enough inside for the three of them to sit cross-legged on a mat of plastic sheeting, and ‘pow wow’. They had built the fort, which they called Fort Knocks, near the crest of a hill between Aspinwall, Pennsylvania, and Fox Chapel, their home towns. The great thing about Fort Knocks, as far as all three were concerned, was that nobody knew about it, and nobody could find it. They had covered it with brush and dry leaves, so that it would seem to a hiker who had lost his way as an impenetrable thicket to be avoided. But, they knew just where the entrance was: you had to crawl under an old fir tree against which it had been build. Then, you had to crawl down along one of the branches until you reached the ‘portcullis’, a metal grid behind which was a small wooden door just big enough for Gary, who was the largest of the three, to crawl through. Inside, and suspended from the rather haphazard tarpaper and planking roof, was a red oil lantern. This lantern had been ‘liberated’ from the back of a caboose, which had been sitting in the rail siding across Freeport Road from the town of Aspinwall. The lantern, when lit – which it invariably was for a ‘pow wow’, cast a lurid red glow on the three boys.

“Arm the knocker,” Gary directed, as he seated himself inside.

Gene responded, “got it,” as he pulled tight the length of elastic (the waistband of some discarded trousers). The elastic ‘armed’ a lever, one end of which would knock

against the side of the fort if it was disturbed by any movement of the branch at the entrance. This ingenious means of warning of the presence of possible intruders was what gave the fort its name. (The three friends had, however, never worked out what they would do in the event of an unexpected knock. There was no back door or escape from the small space; nor was there any effective means of deterring approach by an 'enemy'.)

Gary was determined to pre-empt any feelings of panic on the part of his two friends: particularly by LaMarr, whom he regarded with a mixture of envy for his family's upward mobility and doubt as to his 'toughness'. He was less concerned about Gene: he seemed tough enough, even though he was from the other side of Squaw Run Road: Fox Chapel, a wealthy residential area.

Gary lived on the edge of Aspinwall, a mixed community, at the south end of Western Avenue, immediately behind the tacky shops and repair garages of the commercial area, in a cramped, three-bedroom rented accommodation with his sister, his mother and her latest boyfriend. It was noisy with the traffic from Freeport Road and the exit from the bridge over the Allegheny River.

LaMarr Johnson lived near the center of the Aspinwall grid of streets, at number 57 Third Street, in a white frame house, which his family owned. Third Street was quiet and lined with maple trees.

Gene's place, a large, four- bedroom brick house, painted white, was set in the midst of a large lawn near the end of Hillcrest Road.

Now, the three were in the eighth grade at Dorseyville Middle School, having been friends since their second year at O'Hara Elementary School, six years ago. In spite of their differing backgrounds, they shared a love of excitement and adventure which, they had learned, could be best achieved by being together. Their motivations for excitement and adventure were different. Gary wanted to test his limits as he strove for importance and recognition. Gene, a confirmed rebel wanted to be different, particularly from his father, whom he admired, but resented for his aloofness. And LaMarr? Well, LaMarr had conflicting feelings: he was, by nature cautious, but he believed that his family had advanced though being innovative and open to change. Besides, he liked being the friend of two smart white kids: one rich and one very clever.

"Now look guys," Gary began, "nothing to worry about. Nobody saw us. Nobody knows who shot the marbles. So relax."

“Yeah, cool it,” Gene added.

“OK, but what if somebody got hurt?” LaMarr asked, hesitantly, not wanting to be the ‘odd man out’.

Gene responded: “LaMarr, we don’t *know* anything!”

“OK, we don’t *know* anything. OK. But what about that guy yelling that a girl was hurt?”

“He was probably just pissed off that we hit his car, and he was just trying to scare us,” Gene said.

“Maybe, but why would he call for an ambulance – he wouldn’t make that up.”

Gary considered this: “he might – if he was really clever and wanted to make us feel guilty.”

There was a moment of quiet in the fort. LaMarr cracked his knuckles and pursed his lips; he said softly: “well, I do feel a little guilty.”

“Oh come on, LaMarr, don’t be such a pussy,” Gene admonished.

LaMarr hung his head, but said nothing.

In the distance, they could suddenly make out the sound of a siren. It was moving rapidly from right to left; Gary followed the direction of it with his hand until it slowed and stopped. “Maybe it’s the police coming to investigate,” he suggested. The siren had stopped.

Gene said: “I think that was actually an ambulance siren. They have a longer wail, you know. . . . Let’s listen for the police radio. They have it on real loud when they stop with the doors open.”

They sat in silence, but there was no sound but the momentary cawing of a crow in the distance.

“Can we sneak out and check?” LaMarr volunteered, hesitantly.

Gene shook his head violently: “God, no! We can’t take a chance of being seen!”

“What if one of us just peeked out?”

“And what if they spot you and call out the tracker dogs,” Gary said, his eyes were narrowed in suspicious thought: “what then?”

“If we really wanted to find out, we could go home, get our bicycles and ride by, as if we were just out for a ride,” Gene suggested.

LaMarr shook his head: “by the time we got there, the ambulance would be long gone. What we could do is walk down to St. Margaret’s Hospital (at the eastern edge of Aspinwall) – that’s probably where the ambulance will go.”

“And what will we ask when we get there? ‘Was there someone just admitted who was injured on Squaw Run?’ ‘Yes, as a matter of fact there was. Wait here for a moment, please; the police would like to question you.’”

“Look, guys,” Gary said, slowly and firmly, “we’ve got to do two things: don’t ask and don’t tell. . . Got it? If we don’t ask, we don’t arouse suspicion. And, more important we have to agree not to tell *anyone*. Gene, that means no bragging to your cousin, Robert, and, LaMarr, that means no confession to Father Benedict. . . . Agreed?”

Gene nodded vigorously: “I agree! Besides, we don’t know whose marble may have done it. So we’re equal in this.”

“We’ve got to swear in blood to this!” Gary directed, “and each of us should cut a finger.” He retrieved a scuffed pen knife from his pocket, opened the blade, and gestured meaningfully with it. He proceeded to make a small cut in his left index finger.

Gene and LaMarr followed his example. The boys pressed their fingers together.

“Say it with me”, Gary commanded: “We swear on our blood never to ask and never to tell about what happened here today!” They did.

LaMarr looked at his friends and suddenly felt upbeat: “I feel like we’re really brothers now!”

“Yeah. Kind of like cavaliers,” Gene added.

“Or the three musketeers! Yeah! How about that?”

Gene considered this. “What were their names?” he asked. “One was called d’Artagnan.”

Gary replied: “No he wasn’t one of them! Didn’t you ever see the movie? They were called Athos, Porthos and Aramis.”

LaMarr proposed: “I’ll be Athos!”

“And I’m Porthos,” Gene added.

“OK. I’ll be Aramis. . . . You guys know what their motto was? ‘One for all and all for one!’”

“That’s perfect!” Gene said.

Gary was thoughtful: “but there’s just one other thing. . . . We’ve got to get rid of the evidence.”

“Not the slingshots,” Gene remonstrated, “we just got them!”

“Well, we can’t be seen with them!”

“We can leave them here in Fort Knocks,” LaMarr proposed, “then, if we need them, we can always get them.”

Gary was doubtful: “and what if the fort gets raided?”

LaMarr suddenly brightened: “you guys know that big old tree near the power line over there? Well, there’s a big knot hole about ten feet up. I think there’re squirrels living in it. We can put them inside the hole.”

“Yeah, but what if the squirrels chuck them out?” Gary asked.

“We can weight them down with a bag of marbles,” Gene offered, “they’ll never be able to move them. Only problem is making sure the squirrels aren’t at home when we reach in.”

* * *

When he got home later that Saturday afternoon, Gary was feeling a bit disagreeable. It wasn’t that he was worried about shooting the marbles, or even that they *may* have hit someone – at least he didn’t think he was worried. It was just that the day hadn’t gone as he had planned: they would shoot some marbles at squirrels in the woods – maybe they would try to hit a bird like a starling: they were pretty worthless. But then Gene had suggested that they try ‘artillery shots’ onto Squaw Run Road: if they got the trajectory right, they would hear the marbles striking the pavement. The challenge would be to ‘fire at the right elevation’.

‘Damn Gene!’ he thought, *‘we should have stuck to squirrels and starlings!’*

He got a Coke and a package of chips from the kitchen, flopped down on the parlour sofa, and turned on the radio. He was listening to the Pirates - Dodgers baseball game when his mother Barbara Kohlhower (better known as Babs) came in.

“Hey, Baby, how are ya?”

“OK, Mom.” His attention continued to be devoted to the game: the Brooklyn Dodgers had two men on base and one out.

His mother regarded him thoughtfully. She appeared to be in her late forties, though she was ten years younger. Contributing to her older appearance were her angular, lined facial features and her unkempt bleach-blonde hair. She wore an old pair of jeans which were torn at the knees and a maroon plaid, cotton flannel shirt which was not tucked into her waist band.

“Gary, Mrs. Romanoski next door needs some electrical help. Could you go and see what the problem is?”

He shrugged: “she’s always got something wrong,” he said sulkily.

She recognized his grumpiness, and asked, “what’s got you in a mood?”

His attention remained fixed on the game: “nothin’, Mom, I’m just listenin’ to the game.”

“What did you, Gene and LaMarr do this afternoon?”

He glanced up at her briefly, saw nothing out of the ordinary in her face, and decided that it was best to be a bit more cheerful.

“Nothin’ much. We were just hanging out in the woods.” He held her gaze for several seconds with the trace of a smile.

“What’s the status of your homework?”

“I did most of it this morning. I’ll do the rest tomorrow.”

“OK. Well, can you see what Mrs. Romanoski needs this afternoon?”

“Hmmpf,” and his attention returned to the game.

She stood close to him, leaning over slightly: “Is that a ‘yes’ I heard?”

He looked up at her with resignation: “OK, Mom. It’s the bottom of the eighth inning. I’ll go see what she wants as soon as the game is over.”

“That’s good. Just be back home for dinner at seven.”

The Dodgers scored two more runs, making it six – one. Pittsburgh was getting trounced, and the game had done nothing to improve his mood. ‘*Screw it,*’ he thought. He switched off the radio, and went out of the house.

Mrs. Romanoski lived in a small frame bungalow behind Gary’s house. She was Polish, about seventy. Her husband had worked at US Steel in one of the mills along the river. He had died just over a year ago, of lung cancer, and Mrs. Romanoski lived alone with a small, brownish, yapping dog. Her daughter, her sons, and assorted grandchildren would stop by to see her – particularly on Sundays.

He pulled back the screen door, which had several large tears, and knocked. Then he remembered her deafness, knocked harder and called out: “Mrs. Romanoski!”

The dog, Tomas, started to bark – maybe he was getting deaf, too.

From inside he heard: “Just coming!” The door opened.

“Oh, dere you are Gary boy! I am veddy glad to see you. Come in. Quiet, Tomas! you know Gary.” She was very overweight, and dressed in a faded blue cotton

dress. She had a kindly face with dark brown eyes; wisps of grey hair escaped the green bandana she had tied around her head.

“Now, den. Veddy glad to see you. De children and grandkids are coming for da lunch tomorrow. But mine mixer not vork! Can’t bake cake!”

“What’s the problem with the mixer,” Gary inquired, fending off Tomas, who was snuffling at his shoes.

Mrs. Romanoski made an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders, her palms turned up. “I not know. It not vork.”

He followed her into her kitchen, which had probably been installed by her late husband when they bought the house thirty-five years previously. The paint had worn off the cabinets, and the grey counter top was scarred and uneven. Mrs. Romanoski approached an antique, electric hand mixer which was resting in a bowl of flour. Ostentatiously, she pressed the red button on top of the mixer, and nothing happened.

Gary picked up the mixer and began to examine it. Certainly, it was old, but the power cord and the plug appeared to be intact. He moved the beaters; they weren’t jammed. His eye wandered to the electric socket. Something else was plugged in there. He traced the cord; it ended in a dented old toaster by a stained wooden box marked ‘BREAD’. Idly, Gary pushed down the handle to start the toaster, and, while he was still thinking about the mixer, he passed his hand over the toaster. Nothing. “Does the toaster work, Mrs Romanoski?” he asked.

“Yes, it work veddy good.”

“Well, it’s not working now.”

“How you know?”

He demonstrated with his hand that there was no heat. Her shoulders and hands indicated that this, too, was a mystery to her: “it vas vorking yesterday.”

“Where is your fuse box, Mrs Romanoski?”

“Vat is it you want, Gary boy?”

He thought: *‘My God! Didn’t her husband tell her anything!’* He opened the door to the one-car garage and began to scan its walls. Finding a grey metal box outside the door, he opened it, but found he could not see well enough inside. His request for a ‘flashlight’ stimulated another shrug of the shoulders, but on opening the garage door, he found he could see well enough into the fuse box. He unscrewed one of the fuses and replaced it with another which he found sitting on top of the box.

“Try it now,” he suggested.

Mrs Romanoski disappeared into her kitchen and he heard the sound of the mixer. She came back to the garage, and made an awkward attempt to hug him: “thank you so much, Gary boy.” Tomas joined in with a chorus of barks, though it was difficult to say whether he was pleased or jealous.

“You explain to me what you do?” she asked, “my son, Johnny, he take care of electricity, but I not know what to do.”

She seemed so grateful and so eager to understand that he took a good ten minutes to explain the mysteries of the fuse box. The fuse, itself, was an intellectual challenge for her, but she seemed to understand that the fuse would melt before the wires got hot enough to start a fire.

“Mrs Romanoski, will you please ask Johnny to buy you some more fuses – like this one – and a flashlight. You shouldn’t be without a flashlight.”

“Yes, yes! Thank you veddy much. Now I give you big hug, Gary boy.” And she enveloped him against her massive bosom. As he turned to go, feeling self-conscious and embarrassed, she promised: “tomorrow, I bring you big piece of cake!”

* * *

Gary retreated to his room. He flopped down on his bed and stared at the nearly life-sized poster of Roberto Clemente, the Pirates outfielder who was batting just under .350 that season. ‘*Struck out twice this afternoon,*’ he mused, ‘*what the hell was the matter with him! . . . once OK, but twice! . . . that business this afternoon with LaMarr and Gene was one big strike out! . . . but Mrs Romanoski appreciates me . . . OK. Does that make it even? . . . Doesn’t feel very even.*’

“Gary, dinner’s ready!” his mother called, “Come on down and wash your hands!” His hands were still slightly wet when he slid into his place at the table, across from his sister, Gloria, who was eleven. Gloria, ever the social creature, was babbling away to her mother about what her various girlfriends had done. Gary took a hot dog roll from the package in the middle of the table, speared one of the hotdogs on his plate, fitted it into the roll which he had smeared with Heinz mustard, and began to eat.

Brian, his mother’s boyfriend asked: “Did you listen to the game this afternoon?”

“Yeah,” Gary replied glumly, his eyes fixed on the mustard jar. “Did you?”

“Yeah. I heard the last three innings over at Dino’s.” (Dino was Brian’s drinking pal, who, as far as Gary could tell, was always with a different woman.)

Babs interrupted: “you and Gary could have listened to the game here.” There was a note of disapproval in her tone.

“Yeah, I know, Honey, but Dino invited all the guys from Sears to listen to the game and have some beers at his place.” (Brian and Dino worked in the garage at Sears.)

Babs said: “I suppose all various girls were there, too.” She was looking at him directly, hands on the table at either side of her plate.

Brian considered this for a moment before responding, somewhat defensively:

“Honey, I can’t help it if the guys are all single.”

‘Yeah,’ Gary thought, ‘*but you can help it that you’re single!*’ Actually, he wasn’t at all sure he wanted Brian as a step father. It was true that he saw more of him than he saw of his own father, who had moved to Youngstown, Ohio, and who never called or visited. But there was something about Brian that made him uneasy: maybe it was his age – a lot younger – maybe ten years younger than his mother. Maybe it was because he was her current boyfriend (he could remember five since his dad had left). Was it because of the creaking and groaning which came from her bedroom at night? Certainly it was because of the angry raised voices which he and Gloria heard every now and then.

His mother had lapsed into sulky silence.

“Your pal, Roberto, didn’t do so good,” Brian offered.

“He’s not really my pal.”

“I thought he was – what with that big poster you have of him.”

Gary fought to control his rising resentment, which could flare when he felt mocked.

He pushed the baked beans around his plate for a moment before responding:

“Look,” he said, unable to keep the testiness out of his voice, “I’m a Pirates fan, and I like Roberto Clemente, but they didn’t play very well today. OK?”

“OK.” Brian held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. Babs reached across and quietly touched her son’s arm in consolation.

* * *

Gene was staring absent-mindedly at the huge stained glass window behind the altar. Ever since he could remember, it had been a source of wonder to him. The image was of Jesus with a shepherd’s crook in his left hand, his right hand raised in

blessing. Before him, seated on the grass, were a group of children, in Biblical dress, their faces upturned. Sunlight streamed through the window, showering the interior of the church with bright shards of color.

'How do they do that,' he wondered; 'how do they stain a single piece of glass with different colors? . . . It's not a usual stained glass window – made up of lots of small pieces of glass, each stained a different color. This one has . . . let's see . . . twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four pieces of glass . . . each piece the same size . . . six pieces vertical and four horizontal.'

He was sitting on his mother, Betty's, right; his father, Richard McCarthy, was on her left, and his older brother, Rick sat next to his father. His father was, as always, dressed in a business suit for church. Rick, aged fifteen, was wearing a pair of blue corduroy trousers, and a forest green sport jacket over a white polo shirt. Gene grimaced to himself as he recalled the 'scene' he had caused that morning. He had come down from his room wearing a faded pair of jeans and a Pittsburgh Steelers sweat shirt.

His father had admonished: "Gene, you can't go to church looking like that!"

"Why not?"

"Because that's not the way people dress when they go to our church."

"Some kids do."

"Well *we don't!* Now, go upstairs and change."

'When will I ever be able to dress the way I want to?' he wondered, 'probably when I go to college,' he thought mournfully.

He picked up the Book of Common Prayer when his mother nudged him, found the right page, and began to follow the readings. But his mind wandered.

'I wonder whether a girl was really hurt yesterday. . . . What was she doing on Squaw Run Road, anyway? . . . Why would she have been walking along the road? . . . Everybody in Fox Chapel drives their children where they have to go. . . . Maybe she was from Aspinwall. . . . But why would she have been walking there? . . . Unless she was going to see friends But then she would have been riding a bike. . . . Maybe it was just a ricochet. . . . Maybe she wasn't really hurt. . . . But what if she was? . . . And what if it was my marble that hit her? Oh, God, I hope not! . . . How would I ever know?'

His rambling thoughts were suddenly interrupted by what the minister, John Edwards, was saying: “In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask to be forgiven for our ‘trespasses’.”

He held up his fingers to make quotation marks around the word ‘trespasses’.

“We can call it ‘trespass’, ‘transgression’, ‘wrongdoing’, or a ‘misdeed’, but the word which is used most often in the Bible is ‘sin’.”

Gene was listening. Mr Edwards explained that sin came into the world through Adam.

‘But how did Adam bring all the sin into the world?’ Gene wondered, ‘he just ate the apple . . . He wasn’t supposed to . . . but how could eating an apple bring all the wars and murders and robberies into the world?’

Mr Edwards said that Jesus was a new Adam who came into the world to take away sin. “I’m sure He meant to,” Gene thought, “but there’s still plenty of it here. . . How could anyone get rid of all the sin? , . . Some people just like it! . . . They’re not going to give it up!”

As he listened, there was one thought which intrigued Gene: that Jesus was a ‘new Adam’. “He was completely different from Adam,” Gene mused, “He always did what was right; Jesus listened to God, and obeyed him – He even died because God wanted him to! But Adam was told not to do one thing and he did it!”

Gene decided he wanted to understand this: why was Mr. Edwards calling Jesus the new Adam when they were so different?

“Aha!” he thought, “they were both created by God. . . But, aren’t we all?”

Gene had a unique skill: to hold one thought in his mind, while he sought out and considered an opposing thought.

“Yes, but Adam and Jesus are both God’s special creations. . . . Are they the only special creations? . . . As far as I’ve learned: yes. . . . So what does that mean? . . . It means that God’s first special creation was man – the beginning of the human race, and his second special creation was Jesus who came to show man how to live correctly. . . . That’s it! Jesus didn’t take away sin: he told people what they should do. . . .But, that’s not entirely true, because the Bible says that Jesus actually forgave the sins of the people who came to him.”

Later, while he was having Sunday lunch at home with his parents and brother, Gene remained thoughtful.

His mother said: "Gene, you seemed to be paying good attention to Mr Edwards when he was talking in church."

"Nah, he was just daydreaming, as usual!" his brother, Rick, who had been named for their father, interrupted.

"How do you know?" was Gene's tart response.

"Do you want to tell us what you thought of Mr Edward's sermon, Gene?" his father put in.

Gene shrugged.

"Well," Gene's mother, Betty, said, "I thought it was a good sermon. I thought he made the point about sin and contrition rather well."

"Did you know," Gene finally spoke, addressing his brother, "that 'Adam' means 'red earth'?"

"Is that what you learned in six years of church school?" Rick taunted.

Betty McCarthy gave her elder son a disapproving look, and Rick turned his attention to his mashed potatoes.

"Actually," Betty said, "I didn't know that, but it makes sense, if we take the Bible's literal wording that God created Adam from clay."

Gene brightened at his mother's intervention: "here's a question for you. Mr Edwards said that Jesus takes away the sins of the world, but sin is still here, and when Jesus was alive, He didn't take it away. The Pharisees and the tax collectors were doing bad things."

"So what's the question?" Rick asked.

"Did Jesus take away the sin from the world?"

"I think," Mr. McCarthy suggested, "that Mr. Edwards left out the word 'can'."

"You mean Mr Edwards should have said 'Jesus can take away the sins of the world?' Gene asked.

"Yes."

"OK, but if he can do it, how does he do it?" Gene inquired.

His father was startled: "Gene, you ought to know the answer to that after all your years in church school."

Gene pushed his broccoli to the side of his plate. He hated admonitions from his father; they always made him feel like a stupid child.

"I guess we didn't study that," he said, lamely.

He was aware of his mother's hand stretching out toward him: "I think you actually do know the answer, Gene. Isn't it about prayer?"

He looked at his mother, at her patient, warm and understanding expression.

"Yeah, Mom, I guess it is."

Heddy, LaMarr's grandmother, was someone special to him. She wasn't always loving, but sometimes she could be tough, and then she might say: "You gotta do better than that, LaMarr. I know you can, and I want you to do better next time!" (This when he had gotten a C in algebra.)

And excuses didn't work with Heddy. He had tried: "But, Heddy, I got good grades on my homework."

"But you didn't do good on the big test! That's what counts! . . . You gonna be a success in life?" (She regarded this as a rhetorical question, and she ploughed on.)

"When you step up to the plate, you gotta *hit* the ball!" (She looked intently at LaMarr and swung her arms, as if he were the pitcher and she the batter.) "Don't do no good to swing and miss the ball. You ain't gonna score no runs that way!"

And, in fact, LaMarr had gotten a B the next semester. "That's m'boy," she had said, "I told ya you could do it!" And she gave him one of her bear hugs, which, when he was smaller, would nearly suffocate him in her huge bosom. Now, at age thirteen, he had grown enough to escape that almost welcome suffocation.

On this Sunday afternoon, he was sitting on the cream leather sofa between Heddy and his dad, Herbert, who was watching the second game of the Pirates double header with the Dodgers. Herbert was wearing a yellow and black Pittsburgh Steelers tee shirt, black sweat pants and black trainers. He was a big man – about six feet three inches tall, with a muscular torso and long black dreadlocks which fell over his shoulders. His face, the color of café au lait, had high cheek bones, dark eyes and a thoroughly engaging smile.

Heddy was reading a copy of *Ebony* magazine, and now and then she would comment on the black celebrities who were featured: "That Rosalee Kitt gotta learn how to behave herself! Says here, she's got herself a new man!"

Without looking up from the game, Herbert asked: "What's wrong with her havin' a man, Heddy?" (Herbert had gotten into the habit of calling his mother 'Heddy' when

he was LaMarr's age. She had been widowed when Herbert was a young man, and she felt faintly flattered being called 'Heddy' by her young, successful son.)

"I don't object to her havin' a man, as such. But she don't have to steal him from somebody else! And she don't have to go lookin' so damn slinky!"

Herbert glanced at her and smiled: "You're not goin' to find a lot you approve of in *that* magazine. Why don't you look at the *National Geographic*? There's a copy over there."

Heddy grunted dismissively: "I gotta find out what's goin' on!"

LaMarr put in: "You just want to find out what's goin' on, even if you don't agree with it. Right, Heddy?"

"That's right, LaMarr! I reserve the right not to approve of what's goin' on!" She glanced over at her grandson who was wearing a pair of jeans, a clean, white T-shirt and white trainers. He had a pencil in his hand and he was completing an exercise in his chemistry book.

"LaMarr, How you gonna do your homework proper when your dad has the ball game on and your grandma's talkin' about what's goin' on?"

"I'm OK, Heddy, these are just easy chemistry problems, and I can do them one by one. I'm not really watchin' the game, and I like being with you guys."

LaMarr's two younger brothers, Rudy, age ten, and Jackson, aged seven burst into the family room, with their mother, Janet, close behind. The boys, recognising that their father and grandmother were fully occupied, pounced on LaMarr, dragged him to the floor and began a tussling free-for-all.

Janet scolded: "Stop it, boys!" She stooped over to kiss her husband as her sons disengaged reluctantly from their wrestling. "I found new shoes for the boys at Hardies. Thank goodness they're open on Sundays!"

Herbert responded; "That's good. Let me see them, boys." (Then, in a somewhat sterner tone) "Rudy, keep your feet to yourself. There's no need to kick your brother." Rudy desisted, but he put on a wicked grin for Jackson.

Janet flopped down in a matching cream leather upholstered chair. She was about five feet four with pale blue eyes, a pretty face and light blonde hair. Her work as a physical fitness trainer at a local gym, and four years as a cheerleader for the Pittsburgh Steelers (where she had met Herbert) had kept her ample figure in good trim, in spite of having had three boys and approaching forty.

“What do you guys want for dinner?” she inquired.

“Well, Janet, I took the liberty of taking some pork chops out of the freezer. Thought maybe I could prepare some greens while Herbert does the chops on the grill.”

“Oh, thank you, Heddy, you’re a saint! What would we do without you?”

“I ain’t no saint, darlin’, and you all’d do just fine without me.”

“No, we wouldn’t, Heddy!”

The news spread quickly around Dorseyville Middle School on the next day, Monday: a seventh grade girl had been hit on the head by a small projectile while riding her bicycle down Squaw Run Road. She had apparently lost consciousness, and fell from her bike. She was taken to St. Margaret’s Hospital where she was operated on. Gary, Gene and LaMarr exchanged pale-faced glances as they listened to their schoolmates tell, re-tell and speculate about the event.

Gary whispered: “Aw, shit. I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither,” Gene muttered. LaMarr was too choked up with concern to say much of anything.

After lunch, the boys’ homeroom teacher, Mrs Novatny, announced: “we’ve just had word that Betsy Williamson, the little girl who was hit while riding her bike on Saturday, has had brain surgery early yesterday morning. She’s conscious now, and they expect she’ll be able to go home in a couple of days. I should add that if any of you saw what happened, would you please come tell me or Mr Faulkner (the principal) what you saw.”

Gary exchanged critical glances with Gene and LaMarr.

“Mrs Novatny?” One of their classmates had his hand up.

“Yes, Eddie.”

“Do you know what kind of brain surgery she had? I mean, was it really serious?”

“I believe they operated to relieve the pressure on her brain. Sometimes, when you have a concussion, there can be bleeding which puts pressure on the brain, and it can be quite serious. But, in Betsy’s case, since they are saying she’ll be going home in a couple of days, I don’t think it’s very serious. . . .Did you see it happen, Eddie?”

“No, I didn’t, Mrs Novatny. I was just worried. I think Betsy’s a very nice girl.”

There was a murmur that went around the classroom. Mrs Novatny was able to pick out the words 'his girlfriend'. She clapped her hands. "OK, girls and boys, would you take out your copies of *A Tale of Two Cities*. I believe we were on chapter five."

LaMarr opened his book, and looked through misted eyes at the page marked 'Chapter 5'. He was praying; "*Oh, God, I'm so sorry! Please make Betsy alright.*"

Gene, too, was pretending to follow the class discussion, but his mind was elsewhere: "*Oh, Jesus, I pray that I wasn't the one who did it! Please make her well again!*"

Gary had his book open in front of him, but he was looking out the window: "*Oh, Lord, if you'll keep our secret and don't let Betsy die, I'll never do something so foolish again. I promise!*"

On Wednesday, *The Herald*, the Aspinwall – Fox Chapel newspaper, ran an article on page two:

Aspinwall Girl Injured

Betsy Williamson, age twelve, of Second Street, Aspinwall was injured on Saturday by an unknown missile which struck her on the head as she was riding home on her bicycle on Squaw Run Road. She suffered a subdural hematoma, and was rushed to St. Margaret's Hospital, where Dr. Ben Farthingale operated.

Dr Farthingale said: "Betsy is a very brave girl, and she tolerated the surgery very well. I am hopeful she'll make a full recovery."

Betsy's father, Noel Williamson said: "It is incomprehensible to me that anyone could throw something at a young girl who is riding home on her bike. I hope the culprits will be brought to justice!"

Patrolman Wickering, of the Fox Chapel Police, said: "We are still investigating this very unfortunate incident, and would welcome any assistance from members of the public."

Betsy is scheduled for release from St. Margaret's Hospital today.

"Babs, did you read this about the little girl who was hit on the head while riding home on her bike?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, it's terrible." Babs, Gary's mother, responded from the kitchen. She was preparing dinner and Brian, with an open bottle of Rolling Rock Beer by his side, was reading the paper.

Brian looked up from the paper at Gary, who was doing his homework at the table: "Do you know this girl, Betsy, Gary?"

Gary appeared to continue his study of his algebra text book: "Yeah, I know her a little; but, she's not in my class."

Betsy Williamson returned to school on the following Monday. She was wearing a blue ski cap which covered her head, so that her light brown hair fell only on her left shoulder. She had a freckled face, a turned-up nose, and an almost perpetual smile. It was not difficult to understand why Eddie, her boyfriend, considered her 'pretty'. She was wearing a trace of pink lipstick, even though school rules prohibited makeup. Betsy was mobbed by her schoolmates on her arrival, and Gary, Gene and LaMarr joined the general crush around her in the entrance hall. She seemed like a celebrity entering a concert hall where she was expected to perform. The questions came thick and fast:

"How are you feeling, Betsy?"

"I feel pretty much OK now."

"Were you in a lot of pain?"

"Some, but I was out for a lot of the time."

"Where were you hit?"

"Right up here," she replied, gesturing toward her head above her right ear.

"What was it?"

"I don't know. I fell off my bike as soon as it happened."

"Is that how you hurt your arm?"

“Yeah, I broke my arm when I fell. That’s why I have this cast,” she said, holding up her right arm.

“Did they really drain your brain?”

“They just took the fluid away. My brains are still in there – I think.”