

Josh's Wall

Chapter 1

“WHAT?” JOSH ASKED. He held the book in his hand and fixed his eyes on his wife while he waited for her answer.

Marie raised her head off the pillow and returned his gaze. “Go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiled. “Sure, he’ll love it.”

“How can I know?” He dropped his hand with the book to his side. “I want him to like it so much. I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t.”

“Honey, you know he’ll love it.”

“Why didn’t the publishers like it?”

“Josh—you didn’t write it for them.”

“If the publishers didn’t like it, why would he?”

“You wrote it for him, not the publishers. Go ahead.” Marie shifted her feet and tugged the sheets closer around her neck.

Josh plopped the book onto the desk in the writing alcove. “If you’re cold, why not use the blankets?”

“Sheets are fine.” She giggled and twisted her feet again. “And don’t change the subject. How can he learn the truth if you don’t take it to him?”

Josh searched her eyes for an answer. Marie was the same woman he’d fallen in love with fourteen years ago. She had the same smooth neck, the same long, spiraling strands of black hair loosely arranged around the curves of her head and shoulders, the same lashes and eyes. Yes—those eyes. They were every bit as dark and deep and mysterious as Nanny’s. Those eyes were why he’d married her. And this evening, they danced with delight. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Immensely.”

“Maybe—maybe I should wait until he’s older.”

“My God! You said the same thing last year, and the year before. Michael is eleven now. Besides, we’ve already discussed this. He needs to read your book before next week to soften the blow.”

Her eyes turned somber, but only for a moment and then they not only danced—they sparkled. Oh, how he loved this woman who forced herself to continue in high spirits regardless of the uncertainties they faced. “Okay. I’ll take it to him now.” He folded the note he’d written, slipped it with a sealed envelope behind the front cover, and started for the door.

Marie popped her foot out from under the sheet and hooked his thigh while she giggled again. “Hurry back.”

He’d walked that corridor every night for the past eleven years, but this time it felt longer and darker, almost foreign. He quickened his pace. At the door to his son’s room, he poked his head inside. Seeing nothing but a black void, Josh navigated the room from memory. He nudged against the bed then delicately probed the sheets and found an empty spot. He lay the book down and tiptoed away while being extra cautious not to wake his son.

MICHAEL WATCHED HIS father leave. He waited until he heard his mother giggle and the click when the door to his parents’ room closed. He rose and quietly shut his own door and turned on the dim reading lamp next to his bed. His eyes hurt for a moment. He rubbed them,

then lifted the book and examined its cover, ran his fingers down its spine and along its rough edges. A course orange cloth covered the book. He smiled. The cloth was familiar. His mother had made the cover for the book from the same material she'd used to recover the patio chairs. He flipped it open. A note and an envelope fell out. He set the envelope on the nightstand, unfolded and read the note:

Dear Son,

It's important you don't unseal and read the contents of the envelope until you've finished reading this book. I'm sure the letter will tempt you, but please, for me, read the book first. Then you will fully understand the letter.

I wrote this book for you. It is about me, when I was a boy. I hope you like it. Your mom likes it, but the publishers don't. I only received rejections, but a few publishers read the book, or part of it, and made comments. I'm afraid it is deficient, but it is the best book I can write.

The publishers say it's too harsh, too brash. There is too much author intrusion. The narrative is too formal. The children talk like grownups. The grownups talk like children. The children behave like grownups. The grownups behave like children. The subject matter is too controversial. The subject matter is too unbelievable. And if that wasn't enough, they've all told me that it's too short. They claim my book contains all of these deficiencies and more.

Your mom says this is a good book and not to listen to the publishers. She says there is a beauty in it that transcends its faults. I'm not so sure about this because she also says the same about me. But, Son, if there is a beauty in this book then I think it is the beauty of truth. Don't blame the publishers. They're in business to make a profit and if they don't think the work is commercially sound then they won't touch it. But they don't know everything. I can prove this with a simple story.

In 1980, a writer named John Kennedy Toole won the Pulitzer Prize in Literature for a book called A Confederacy of Dunces. He wasn't present to enjoy the honors because eleven years earlier he'd committed suicide after receiving multiple rejections for it.

His bereaved mother inherited the worthless manuscript. She read it, and thought it might be good. It took her ten years before she found a professor at Loyola University who agreed to read it. She carried the manuscript to him and made sure he read the first page, and the second. Before he knew it, he couldn't put the story down.

I don't believe in publishers. I believe in the writing. I believe if Toole had focused on the writing rather than the publishing, we would have many more Toole stories to enjoy today along with A Confederacy of Dunces.

You will remember parts of this book from stories I've told. There are also parts nobody has ever heard before, terribly frightening parts. I prefer you learn these truths from me, somebody who loves you, rather than from a stranger. This book is my legacy to you, and I pray you will accept it.

There is one more thing. Early into the book you may become upset, maybe even angry with me. Embrace these feelings, explore them, and then you will understand the title of this book.

Love,

Dad

Michael folded the note and set it aside. He turned a page and read the title:

Josh's Wall

by Joshua Crass

He flipped another page, and continued to read.