

# Mirth Defects

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Edited by Laura "Rambobitch" Avramovich

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# Dedication



For my parents, Roy and Donna, who taught me the meaning of the word *Try*, and pretended they didn't notice when I read under the sheets with a flashlight. Thanks for giving me your wicked sense of humor, our squinty left eye, for never saying 'no' about a new puppy or a new girl. I've noticed every cardinal, deer, fox, and owl since. *Thanks for sending them.*

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And for you, Dear Reader, for taking a chance on me. *I hope you have a blast! :-)*



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And most of all, to my readers. Take your shoes off, get your feet wet, and splash around in this story.

***I wrote this for you...***

# CHAPTER 0

*"Don't say the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream."*

*--Mark Twain, 1835-1910*

I heard the woman scream again, and I couldn't take it anymore. I slipped out of the warm bed and into the cold, cruel world to investigate. I had an enormous headache, and the light wasn't helping. The word "hangover" came to mind but didn't quite fit. I wasn't sure I could remember what a hangover was. It felt like even my head wasn't fitting properly.

I saw three faces, a man and two women. The man looked me up and down and shook his head. "Another runt," he growled. I let loose with a roundhouse kick to his chin. The blow missed horribly, but the man didn't seem to notice.

"Good one, Papa!"

I knew the voice but couldn't remember who it was. Familiar, on the tip of my tongue, but infinitely distant. Still, I felt the urge to thank him.

"Thanks, boa."

Suddenly, I was jerked into the air, my ankles clasped together by the man, and a sharp whack on my ass made my face contort in pain. I could feel my face turning blue, but I wasn't going to cry this time.

A woman with the prettiest blue eyes I had seen all day since opening my own shit-brown ones came into view. "Aww!" she exclaimed, wrapping me in a towel and helping me to an upright position. It was the ol' good cop, bad cop routine. I knew it well. Still, I was surprised when she began to smile; it made me feel all warm and gooey inside.

"That's it, baby boy! Breathe! You can do it!"

Her eyes lit up like only a woman's can. The tears welled up and I readied myself to cry out from the depths of my soul. Pushing with all my might, I forced a tiny squeak from my disproportionately large mouth. Even a dog wouldn't have heard me.

My new girlfriend became the most beautiful girl I'd seen all day. "Welcome to the World!" was all she could get out before a solitary tear slid from her eye.

Eternal bliss. right up until a split second later when the man grabbed me, jerking me from the woman's grasp, and pushed her out of view. The man put me in a clear box, closed the lid, and walked away.

I had a feeling it wasn't the first time I was locked up somewhere, soaking wet, head pounding, with some man messing with my woman. In fact, I was sure it was a pattern that was to repeat itself many times over the next one hundred and four years.

Welcome to the World, indeed.



# CHAPTER 1

Howdy. My name's JD Ferguson. Pleased to meet you.

I was born a poor white child in Des Moines, Iowa back when cars the size of apartments roamed the earth, telephones were nailed to the wall, and people sent Christmas cards to each other. My parents realized early on that I wasn't normal even by our family standards. I was labeled *precocious*, a *little old man*, and a *tender spirit*. What they didn't realize at first was that I was chasing women the whole time. I even tried hitting on the nurse that swaddled me as I slipped from my mama's womb. She had big hair and blue eyes. I was powerless. I couldn't control myself if I wanted, and I sure as hell didn't want to.

Except for the doctor who insisted I spend some time in an incubator, I liked people. I became addicted to meeting new ones, and I quickly realized there were two types of people: a) men who didn't seem to give a damn that they were privileged to hold me, and b) women who seemed to love holding me and didn't want to give me back to my parents. I became a flaming heterosexual.

Ma and Pa beamed with pride every time they showed me off to someone new. I was convinced from the start that I was the center of the Universe, the most important being to ever land on Earth, and I basked in my awesomeness. I hated to

sleep, fearing I would miss meeting a new woman, so I fought it off valiantly. My fatigued parents realized that car rides would put me to sleep. They would load me up in our Buick Roadmaster and drive around Des Moines to send me into slumber. It worked because I wanted to get a nap in before meeting the next woman, but the instant Pa put that gear shift into PARK my eyes would open and I was ready to carpe diem. Or let a woman carpe me. My sleeping patterns drove my parents to the brink of insanity. I remember one time Ma looking at me through red eyes brimming with tears and saying "you will never get a baby brother if you don't let us go to bed!" I didn't know what that meant, and I couldn't understand why they wanted me to have a baby brother anyway. I was cockblocking Pa without even knowing it.

I learned early on that an effective means to woo womenfolk was to show off. My first trick was to smile while a woman changed my diaper. They always smiled back and talked to me. Even the goo goo baby talk was tolerable because they were removing my pants. I still can't get enough of that pants removal thing. And when a woman rubs your goodies with a warm washcloth? Oh. My. God. I didn't realize how much I missed it until years after I was potty trained. A lover came out of the bathroom and wiped me down while I watched her eyes and sucked my thumb. When she was finished, I got out of bed and made her an omelette in the predawn hours. I asked her to marry me before she finished her breakfast. Pay attention, ladies: if you can't get that man to commit to marriage, throw him down on the nearest horizontal surface, ride him like he's a mechanical bull, and clean him up with a warm washcloth. Don't worry about the mess. Sex is sloppy only when performed correctly.

I learned to walk, which was valuable because I

could chase women, but Ma turned out to be a cockblocker herself. Every time I would see a woman in the grocery store and take off on a dead run to meet her, Ma would catch up with me and reign me in. Every woman that noticed my efforts would give me a huge smile that only women have, but I couldn't seem to connect with new ones unless Ma allowed it. Still, I felt like the whole world, and every woman in it, was my oyster.

And then Bob showed up.

My brother Bob was born not long after I learned to walk, it seems, and I became acutely aware that I now had competition finding a soulmate. That little turd Bob had a full head of curly hair and dimples, and the same women that enjoyed removing my diaper now enjoyed removing Bob's. I'm a jealous old sumbitch, and I was a jealous young one too, so Bob had to go. I loved him like a brother but he was cockblocking me too. My first project management task was to remove Bob from the face of earth by hook or by crook.

My first attempt was a trick I was sure would work: I shaved his head. I didn't much care for the way women talked about his curly locks anyway, and my own head of hair had the worst case of bed head west of the Mississippi. Bob would get up from his nap and look like he just left the barber. I couldn't wear a wool stocking cap or walk near overhead power lines without my hair morphing into something so misshapen even the Elephant Man felt sorry for me.

I made a game out of shaving Bob's head by telling him I had a big surprise for him when it was over. I didn't tell him the big surprise was Ma and Pa would give him away or take him to the Animal Rescue League when they took a look at his new hairdo. As it turned out, it was more of a hair don't.

Ma walked into the bathroom without knocking. That right there was an offense that Pa would've sent us to bed early for. I was just about to protest when Ma complimented me on my barber skills.

"JD Ferguson! What in the hell have you done! And where did you get that straight razor?"

"I got--"

"I don't care where you got it! You could have slit Bob's throat!"

That was an option I hadn't considered. I filed throat-slitting away in my bag of future tricks, and began honing my new skill: competition for women.

My next trick was to make my parents forget Bob while we were visiting our grandparents. My thinking was that if I could enamor them with a story while we were getting ready to leave they would forget all about Bob. Our grandparents would have a permanent house guest, and I'd have pick of the litter of women again. That one didn't work worth a damn either. Ma, Pa, and my grandparents had great herding instincts, and Bob ended up back at home with us. I loved the little maggot but he was annoying me with his "I'm just as cute as JD" antics. I came to the conclusion that if Bob wasn't leaving then I had to leave.

After Thanksgiving dinner at my grandparents' house, I patiently waited while everyone slipped into a tryptophan coma, filled my pockets with table scraps, and snuck outside to the most isolated spot on Earth: the cellar. My grandparents lived in an ancient farmhouse in southern Iowa, had a garden bigger than most suburban home lots, and canned vegetables by the ton. The cellar was where the canned goods were kept, and it didn't have an access door from the inside of the house. To get into the cellar you had to lift a gigantic door that laid nearly flat against the ground. I could barely lift it until a west wind helped me. I descended the

steps carefully while watching for signs of the boogeyman. I would soon learn that the boogeyman was upstairs in the living room.

I made a makeshift chair with some empty buckets and boards, leaned back against the wall, and listened for the sound of the Buick leaving the driveway. What I heard through the floorboards instead were the panicked cries of Ma and my grandma searching for me. My undeveloped logic told me they would calm down and I could emerge from the cellar after hearing my parents and Bob head for home in the Buick, but the exact opposite happened. Everyone freaked the fuck out.

The flock of family feet above me sounded like a shoe sale at Macy's on Black Friday. Doors slammed. Cabinets opened and closed. Even the refrigerator was inspected. I could hear Pa and my grandpa make muffled plans to search outside, and I knew my Christmas goose was cooked before Thanksgiving was over. I listened as they stomped out the front door and yelled my name, but I didn't see any sense in hurrying the inevitable. Those two could have found the Lindbergh baby if he was kin.

"Cellar door's open," I heard Pa say.

"Shouldn't be," Grandpa replied.

In less than ten seconds I met Pissed Off Pa and Pissed Off Grandpa for the first time. Even their faces looked like strangers. Both men could move in a hurry, let me tell you. Pa reached me first, balled the front of my jacket up in his hand, and yanked me from my makeshift throne. With a mixture of fear and anger he whacked my ass one time with his other hand. It didn't hurt physically but the humiliation brought tears to my eyes.

"Don't you ever do that to us again!"

"Yes sir," I blubbered.

I didn't, either. I learned my lesson by witnessing the havoc I created. Pa and Grandpa seemed relieved that they found me. Ma and

Grandma practically suffocated me with hugs and kisses. I love a nice set of boobs during a hug but those two were pushing the limit.

I thought about running away from time to time when I didn't get my way but never repeated that stunt. If I couldn't run Bob off I would have to make him understand I was the boss and got the pick of the litter where available women were concerned.

That didn't work out so well either.

## CHAPTER 2

Bob and I did everything together, but not at the same time. I went to kindergarten, Bob went to kindergarten. I learned to ride a bike, Bob learned to ride a bike. I broke my arm, Bob broke my arm. He swears to this day it wasn't on purpose but I know better. And it was all because of a woman.

Ma was holding my hand when I walked into kindergarten on my first day of school. I soon overheard an older woman introduce herself as Mrs. Nelson to another mom, and Ma whispered in my ear "That's your teacher." She looked like a nice lady, and had a genuine smile. I liked her immediately.

I had a preconceived notion of what school would be like but I wasn't prepared for the mass of new girls. They were everywhere. Every shape, size and hair color. Every mood, energy level, and voice timbre. And then I saw my new girlfriend walking across the room, coming to a stop next to Mrs. Nelson. She had brown eyes and brown hair that framed her face in a semicircle. She was beautiful. I watched in awe when dimples mysteriously appeared on her cheeks as she smiled down at Mrs. Nelson. Those very dimples came and went repeatedly as she talked to another student, and I turned my head slightly so I could eavesdrop. What I heard was the voice of an angel.

"I'm Miss Smith, Mrs. Nelson's teaching assistant."

I was happy that she wasn't married.

I suffered through my unrequited love affair with Miss Smith. I couldn't take my eyes off of her when she was in the room. I even enjoyed watching her walk away in her tight little skirts. And watching her suck on that paper straw during Milk Break made her dimples pop out and gave me an odd sensation in my jeans I didn't understand. I had her all to myself for weeks before Bob tried to move in on her.

During Show and Tell one day, a kid had shown a rock he found on his family's farm. I gaped at his boring presentation. It was a rock. I saw a million like it every time we went to my grandparent's homes, and I wanted to liven things up a bit. I asked Miss Smith if I could bring my pet turtle Sparky for Show and Tell. She said it was fine with her as long as Mrs. Nelson agreed. Mrs. Nelson was an easy sell because she thought I was cute and precocious. I didn't have the heart to tell her I was after Miss Smith. I hadn't learned the fine art of closure yet. That, and she was married already.

Ma and Bob came to school the next day, bringing Sparky the Red-Eared Slider turtle for Show and Tell. Miss Smith met them at the door to the classroom and bent down with her hands on her knees to introduce herself to Bob. I watched with intense jealousy as the Dimple Convention rolled into town. Miss Smith's dimples would pop in and out talking to Bob, and then Bob's would do the same as he replied. It made me want to shove cotton balls in Bob's cheeks so he didn't have dimples.

When it was my turn for Show and Tell, I lifted Sparky from his glass home and began my spiel. I told about getting him at the pet store, and his diet, and how we could set Sparky on the floor and



not worry about him getting away. And then Bob stole my thunder.

"He just sits there and then he poops!"

The classroom erupted in laughter, but Ma and I were mortified: Ma because Bob had no social speaking filter, and me because Miss Smith laughed so hard she choked. I had seen her smile, I had seen her giggle, but never a belly laugh. And she couldn't stop smiling at Bob. I made a mental note to make sure Pa's inherited straight razor was still in the medicine cabinet when I got home from school. It seemed to me that Bob's throat still needed some slitting.

When the laughter died down, I finished up my Show and Tell presentation, and the classroom went to recess. Mrs. Nelson invited Ma and Bob to stay for recess. Ma stood with Mrs. Nelson and my beloved Miss Smith, and Bob joined me and several others on the monkey bars. I always had to climb to the very tip top first, and I always did it carefully so I wouldn't slip, but Bob didn't have a Personal Safety filter. He reached the top before me while I wondered about his true genetics. They say humans are descended from apes, but on the monkey bars Bob also *ascended* like an ape.

Bob was starting to piss me off. Random images of straight razors and Bob's tiny body tied to the railroad tracks downtown were clouding my judgement. When he reached the top he raised his arms in victory and yelled "Look, Ma!" Ma, Mrs. Nelson and Miss Smith smiled, applauded, and waved at Bob. I couldn't take it anymore and clambered for the top tier full speed ahead.

When I reached the top I turned around so the back of my legs were braced against a rail, raised my arms, and yelled "Look, Ma!" Ma and both teachers repeated their show of appreciation for the showoff abilities of the Ferguson boys. Bob, however, wasn't too pleased I blocked his view.

"Move, JD! I can't see Miss Smith!"

"She's my girlfriend, Bob," I hissed over my shoulder. "That means you can't look at her. Ask Pa!" And then I made a nearly fatal mistake: I whacked Bob upside the head with one of my two free hands.

If my body was as coordinated as my mind I would have been able to save myself, but us Ferguson's aren't known for our athletic abilities. We can fight with the best of them unless boxing gloves and rules are involved. Our best baseball bat swing is reserved for barroom brawls and bad umpire calls. We can never kick a football through the goal posts but we can lift a man off the ground with a kick to his privates. And Bob aimed squarely at the back of my right knee and kicked out like a mule in retaliation for my backhanded blow to his head. And he was sneaky enough that no authority figures on the ground saw him strike.

When my knee buckled I shifted to the right like a tree being felled by a lumberjack. I was sure I could grab a bar on the way down. I held out hope until I smacked into the asphalt, landing on my right arm. The sound even resembled a tree splintering. The fleeting image of turning Bob into kindling with a chainsaw flitted through my brain until the pain caught up with me. When it did, I turned into a five year old boy's ultimate horror: a screaming, crying girlie boy.

Through my sobs, I ratted Bob out but nobody was buying it. Bob was too sweet and too cute to have done a vicious act. I silently vowed to escalate the arms race between Bob and I, even though my working arms had been reduced by half.

Ma took me to the Roadapple Ridge Hospital and Veterinary Clinic to get all my bones pointing in the correct direction and make sure I was up on my distemper shots. I could tell Bob felt bad. He

even gave me the sucker the nurses had given him when they saw his curly red hair and dimples. If I had tried to extricate it from his sticky fingers he would've fought me to the death, but he actually offered without me asking. That made me very suspicious but he seemed sincere so I ate it anyway.

I thought the snapping of my arm was painful until the doctors ganged up on me in the ER after the x-rays were developed. Our family pediatrician pulled the curtain back, and he was flanked by two guys who looked like they were professional football players except larger. Doc gave me a sick little smile and told Ma my arm was definitely broken. I knew in the pit of my stomach what it felt like to walk to the electric chair. We were fixin' to wrestle, and they outweighed me by a factor of ten. I made a promise to myself to cause Doc as little pain as possible but those other two monolithic butt nuggets were going down in flames if I had anything to say about it. Turns out I didn't.

"This is going to hurt a little bit, JD, but it's nothing you can't handle," Doc said, avoiding eye contact.

"That's what you said when you pulled that nail out of my foot."

Doc's warm grin spread across his face as he turned to face me. "It was sticking out of both sides of your foot. I told you it hurt going in and it was going to hurt coming back out."

A new strategy popped into my head. "How come you pulled that nail out, Doc?"

He regarded me with a healthy dose of skepticism and a creased brow. "Well, because it was sticking out of your foot, and it wasn't a part of your body." He grinned then as if I wouldn't have a comeback.

"That bone in there *is* a part of my body and it's *not* sticking out. How about we just let it heal up

right where it is?"

I heard Ma and a nurse or two giggle quietly. Doc stared at me with his Mona Lisa smile. "We have to set it, JD. It's pretty crooked."

I knew I was doomed but aimed for another giggle from Ma and the staff. "It's bent but I could reach around corners better!"

I heard Ma giggle again and one of the nurses snorted, apologized, and excused herself from the ER. I still wasn't happy but I was getting better.

"Good one, JD."

"Thanks, Doc."

"Are you ready?"

I shook my head no but said "Yes sir." It made Doc grin again. I couldn't help but smile back. He nodded at the aide standing at the head end of the gurney, and the big man pinned me to the padding by my shoulders. I felt the other giant at the foot end of the gurney grip both of my ankles. My good arm was lifted off the gurney, and I felt a hand squeeze mine. I opened my eyes, turned my head, and there was Fearless Bob, squeezing for all he was worth. The kid literally feared nothing, and he was trying to get my courage worked up to a frenzy. And just like that, I wasn't mad at the little sumbitch anymore.

"On three, JD. One. Two. Three."

The entire episode lasted maybe four seconds. I did pretty well until the last second when I felt my bone simultaneously pop and slip back into place. I let out a brief shriek that made Ma sob. I felt a warm washcloth on my forehead and opened my eyes to see two redheads hovering above my face. If that doesn't scare you, nothing will.

Ma was on my left, standing next to Bob. She was doing three things at the same time that have confused me about women since the day I was born. She was biting her lip, crying, and smiling at the same time. On my right was a redheaded

nurse, mopping up the sweat from my forehead and smiling down at me. She was hotter than an autoclave in August. She had big hair, big boobs, a sultry voice, and beautiful blue eyes. Her job, as far as I could tell, was to keep me calm while Doc built the new plaster casing for my mangled arm. It was working. She could have gnawed off my good arm for all I cared.

"That wasn't so bad now, was it? How do you feel, JD?" she asked.

"Better. Pretty good now. What's your name?"

"Sarah," she smiled. "I'm glad you're feeling better. The doctor should be done real soon and then you can go home."

"What? I don't get to spend a night here?" Sarah giggled, music to my ears. I giggled back, and tried the only pickup line I knew by my kindergarten years. "Do you come around here often, Sarah?" I heard Doc and his assistants giggle, and an exasperated "Oh my God" from Ma.

"Yes I do," Sarah cooed. "I work six days a week so I'm here quite a bit."

"Good. I'll look forward to seeing you next time Bob snaps another bone in half."

Sarah's head snapped backward and she belly laughed. I could hear Doc, his helpers, and Bob giggling too. Ma was shaking her head in my peripheral vision but I didn't look at her.

"Okay, JD, you're all done," Doc said. "You have to be careful with your cast, especially while it's still drying. Do you have any questions for me?"

I could feel the heat from the chemical reaction soaking into my arm. It was soothing, but the cast felt like my arm weighed a ton as I lifted it for inspection.

"How soon can people sign it?" I asked.

Doc seemed taken aback, probably because I have a tendency to ask weird questions. "Well, I guess within 30 minutes or so if they're careful."

"Goody goody goody. Will you sign my new cast, Sarah?" I pleaded.

Sarah glanced at Ma before answering. "Uh, sure, JD. I'd be happy to sign it."

I made it a point to give Bob a smug look because he was drooling over Sarah as much as I was.

Ma, Bob and I went to one our favorite haunts for ice cream while we waited for my cast to dry: the hospital cafeteria. Since I was the wounded party, my ice cream was free and unlimited. Ma allowed Bob just one ice cream cone but I ate two just to rub it in. I was bursting at the seams when we caught up with Sarah so she could sign my cast. On our way out the door, I voiced my biggest concern.

"I can't wait to get my cast off."

"Is it bothering you already, JD?" Ma asked.

"No, I just want to see Sarah again."

"Just like your father," Ma sighed.

"Thanks, Ma."

I didn't know at the time that it wasn't a compliment.

## CHAPTER 3

I realized my heart was fickle when I saw Miss Smith the next day at school. I was sure I was in love with Sarah the nurse until I was near Miss Smith again. She signed my cast, but I made sure she signed it on the other side of my arm from Sarah's. I was unwittingly setting up my two girlfriends for a *ménage à trois*, albeit one that would never happen.

During supper that night, I decided to ask the smartest married guy I knew about my mixed emotions.

"Pa, how come you only have one wife?"

Pa choked on his milk. I saw one eyebrow raise up when he looked at Ma before answering. "One is enough, JD."

"But don't you ever wish you could have two at a time?"

I noticed Ma looking at him like she did the time he cleaned catfish on the kitchen counter and left the mess for Ma to clean up.

Pa sighed before answering. "Are we talking about wives, JD? Or two women ... in general?"

I wasn't sure why Pa was deflecting my question, or why Ma had a white-knuckled grip on her butter knife. "Both, I guess. I mean, if one is good, wouldn't two be even better?"

I watched Ma's face turn from mine to Pa's in slow motion. It reminded me of a TV show we saw

about the World War II battleship *USS Iowa*. I was sure the massive gun turrets on the Iowa moved at the exact same speed as Ma's head. My imagination even heard her neck lock in place as she lined up a shot at Pa's head. I had no idea what was going on.

"Your mother and I have discussed having someone help with ... things around the house but she convinced me she doesn't need any help," Pa said dryly.

I didn't understand how we had gone from discussing two women to household chores. I felt like there was a hidden message in Pa's answer but I couldn't figure it out. "Can I be excused, Ma?"

"May I be excused," Ma corrected.

"Sure, I guess, if it's okay with Pa."

Ma closed her eyes and shook her head sadly. Pa stole a quick glance my way and winked. I wasn't sure what the inside joke was but Pa was amused. He got his grin under control before Ma opened her eyes.

"No, JD, it's *may* I be excused, not *can* I be excused." Ma waited expectantly for my revised request.

"Gotcha. *May* Bob and me be excused, ma'am?"

I saw her grit her teeth before she replied. "May Bob and *I* be excused?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm going to sit here with Pa since he doesn't talk all weird." Pa snorted into a hand that covered his mouth so I knew I was golden. If Pa laughed Ma was sure to follow. Always testing the limits, I pressed my luck another inch. "You two scrape your plates and put them in the sink before you go, please."

Pa and Bob were chuckling softly. Ma looked around the table and began giggling too. "Go away, JD. And take Bob with you."

At school the next day, a girl named Suzie Cuneiform walked up to me at recess, blocked my



view of Miss Smith, and asked a question that changed my life.

"Would you like to kiss me, JD?"

Even at age five I was a veteran of odd requests. I analyzed my options before answering. I had seen the way Pa kissed Ma so I was sure I would be good at it. "Nope. We're supposed to keep our hands to ourselves, and you can't kiss without hands."

Suzie pouted, causing an odd sensation in my jeans. I didn't know what that was all about but I was starting to wonder if my refusal was too hasty. Suzie cranked her efforts up a notch by tilting her head to one side and looking at me with a world class smile. "Don't you think I'm pretty?" she asked.

My instincts told me this was dangerous territory but I did the best I could. "You're okay, I guess."

"Just okay?" Suzie's eyes resembled Bob's just before he would take a swing at me. "Do you see a prettier girl on this playground, JD?"

I was having second thoughts about honesty being the best policy but opted for the brutal truth. "Miss Smith is prettier than you are."

Suzie turned to look at Miss Smith. When she looked back at me her eyes were amused. "She's old, JD. You'll never kiss her."

"Yes I will. We're getting married when I get out of kindergarten. I'll be old enough then."

Suzie's body convulsed into laughter, and she skipped back to a circle of girls I hadn't noticed were watching. They all leaned their heads into the middle of a huddle, and they all turned my way and burst into laughter. I knew Suzie had ratted me out, and I was humiliated.

"I'm going to sign your cast, bro."

I turned and realized I was staring someone in the navel. His name was Gasser Jameson, and he

was the tallest kid in our class by a considerable amount. When the photographer lined us up for class photos, Gasser was in the back row next to the principal and both teachers. When it was stormy weather during recess I would watch Gasser's head for signs of precipitation. When his face was wet I would take off on a dead run to get under the canopy next to the door. I usually made it before the raindrops hit people at my level. I also didn't want to be standing next to him because of lightning.

"Hey, Gasser. Sure, you can sign my cast." He had told me he was going to sign it, not asked, but I pretended I was in control anyway. Gasser wrote his first name in a crooked line on my cast, and then did the coolest thing I'd seen all day: he drew a motorcycle under his name. It looked like his name was laying across the seat and gas tank.

Gasser was my new best friend.

"Thanks, bro," I said, craning my neck to look at Gasser. I didn't know what this *bro* thing was all about. I knew he wasn't my brother but it seemed like a nice greeting anyway.

"Anytime, bro." Gasser nodded his head in Suzie's direction. "She try to get you to kiss her?"

"Yeah. Did she try to get you to kiss her too?"

"Not lately. I kissed her older sister and it made Suzie mad."

My mouth dropped open in awe. I knew Suzie's older sister Sadie because I'd seen them walking to school together. Sadie was in the second grade and was so tall I would need a stepstool to kiss her. Gasser wasn't just my new best friend, he was my hero.

"Did Sadie ask you to kiss her?"

"No, I just did it one day when we were in their back yard."

"How did you know she would let you?"

"I didn't."

That was useful information so I filed it away for future reference. I had noticed that sometimes Pa kissed Ma without asking her, and it always made her giddy, but I hadn't processed the motivation behind his move. I was sure there was a reason for why it worked. It became an obsession of mine, this kissing of girls, but I wouldn't act on it for a while.

Gasser and I soon became the best of friends. Ma and Pa pretty much adopted him as their own. Gasser could stay for dinner without being invited, and before long he walked into our house without knocking. Even Bob, the baby of the family, treated Gasser like royalty.

And then we set Bob on fire.