



They Cage the Animals at Night: The True Story of an Abandoned Child's Struggle for Emotional Survival (Signet)

By Jennings Michael Burch

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The heartbreaking, iconic true story of an abandoned little boy's horrific journey through the American foster care system.

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Shuttled through a bleak series of foster homes, orphanages, and institutions, Jennings never remained in any of them long enough to make a friend. Instead, he clung to a tattered stuffed animal named Doggie, his sole source of comfort in a frightening world.

Here, in his own words, Jennings Michael Burch reveals the abuse and neglect he experienced during his lost childhood. But while his experiences are both shocking and devastating, his story is ultimately one of hope—the triumphant tale of a forgotten child who somehow found the courage to reach out for love, and found it waiting for him.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A valuable and beautiful book which addresses issues of concern to everyone—what really does happen to foster children and what allows some children to survive the same emotional trauma that shatters forever the lives of others."—Eleanor Craig, author of *P.S. Your Not Listening*

"A deeply moving and inspiring story."—Alan Arkin

"Everyone who cares about the quality of life and the future of nation should read this book."—William R. Bricker, National Director, Boys Clubs of America

"This heartbreaking, shocking, ultimately triumphant tale is an extremely important book."—Lucy Freeman, author of *Fight Against Fears*

"A must for every library...should be required reading for every couple expecting a child."—Sally Struthers

"This heart-wrenching, autobiographical account...has the power of a Dickens novel."—*Booklist*

"A winner—gripping, unforgettable, shattering."—Flora Rheta Schreiber, author of *Sybil*

About the Author

Jennings Michael Burch was the author of the bestselling autobiography *They Cage the Animals at Night*. He worked as a New York City policeman, a chauffeur, a theater manager, a magazine pressman, and a short-order cook. He held a B.A. in forensic psychology from John Jay College. He passed away in 2013.

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THEY CAGE THE ANIMALS AT NIGHT

Jennings Michael Burch

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is a true story; only the names of the individuals and institutions have been changed.

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE

“Kelly!”

She came away from the rail separating her from the snow leopard. She took my hand.

“Where are your sisters?” I asked as I scanned the area for them.

“Lori took Carolyn to the bathroom.”

“Go and get them, will you? We have to leave now.”

“Oh, can’t we see the seals first?”

“Sure. You fetch your sisters, and I’ll meet you by the seal pool.”

She scampered off toward the rear of the lion house and the bathrooms. I watched her until she disappeared

around the corner of the building.

Kelly is my middle daughter. She's frail and slight, and somewhat shy. She reminds me greatly of myself when I was eight and unprepared. And the moment reminds me of the days when this place, this zoo, was my source of refuge, my home. It may sound strange, but I sought comfort here. I hid from fear and loneliness here. I hid from pain and unkindness here.

I sat on a bench near the seal pool and pressed my hands deep into my pockets. I breathed in the crisp cold air of these last days of autumn, and I remembered....

1

It's unlucky to step on lines and cracks in the sidewalk, but Mom didn't seem to understand this. On the long walk from the subway station, she kept tugging at my arm and telling me to walk straight. It had rained for most of the morning, but now, in the early evening, only a light mist lay heavily in the air. The dark gray smoke from the chimneys along this Brooklyn street didn't have far to travel before blending neatly into the low night sky.

We were on our way to visit with one of Mom's friends. Since it wasn't often I got a chance to be with her all by myself, I didn't mind the wet weather, or her quiet mood, or her tugging at my arm. We walked along at a quick pace. I asked a number of times if we were late, but she didn't answer me. Her usually smooth-skinned forehead was somewhat wrinkled, and her dark eyebrows were bent into a slight frown.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

Her answer was another tug at my arm as I tried to avoid the next line. She released the tight grip she had on my small hand to refer to a piece of paper she had pulled from her pocket.

"Are we there yet?" I asked. I looked up for her answer, but there was none. She studied the paper and then the building numbers.

She regripped my hand and trugged again. The wet ground was beginning to make its way in through the hole in my left shoe. I felt my sock sticking to my toes as I tried wiggling and walking at the same time.

She stopped suddenly and leaned down. She brushed back some hairs sticking up from the top of my head.

"Now, be a good boy."

"I will, Mom." That was my standard answer whether I planned to be good or not.

We climbed a short flight of worn steps bounded by two wrought-iron handrails. We entered the old red brick building through a highly polished wooden door that squeaked as it opened. We were met in the entranceway by a small nun dressed all in white. She nodded to Mom and smiled at me as she greeted us. Her wire-rimmed eyeglasses sat on the very end of her nose. When she spoke, she looked over the top of them.

"And what's your name, little fella?" she asked.

"Jennings," I replied.

"Why, that's a very nice name," she said as she turned to lead us down a very dark and narrow hallway. It was so quiet and still, and the smell of burnt candle wax made me think we were in some sort of a church.

Mom often took me or one of my brothers to some new church somewhere.

I held tightly to Mom's warm hand. We reached the end of the hallway and two wooden benches with red felt cushions.

"Be a good boy and wait here," the little nun said over her glasses. "Your mother and I have a few things to discuss."

I nodded my head as Mom and the nun disappeared into an office and closed the door.

I was about to sit on the nice felt cushions when I remembered my pants were still damp from the rain. Instead, I stood on my tiptoes and looked out through the colors of a stained-glass window. I closed one eye and moved from one colored glass to the next.

"Jennings!" I was jolted away from my world of pink cars and green buildings by the little nun. I turned and regrasped Mom's hand. She looked sad and red-eyed.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

She shook her head and squeezed my hand as we walked back down the hall. We stopped at a door about halfway down, and the nun opened it.

The room was large and blue and filled with noisy children. As we entered, all the children stopped and stared at us. Their silence made me uncomfortable.

Mom leaned down to help me off with my coat, but then hugged me. She kissed my face a number of times. She took one last swipe at my cowlick. I could see the tears on her lower lid as she forced a smile. She frightened me, so I clung to her arm.

"Mom! What's wrong?"

She brought me close to her once again and hugged me. My coat was still only partway off when she straightened up. She gripped my shoulders to hold me off. In a husky sort of voice she said, "I'll be right back."

She turned and slipped through the open door. The nun followed, closing the door behind her.

They left me in the middle of what seemed to be a thousand staring eyes. I felt strange and tingly all over. I couldn't move. I left my coat hanging from one shoulder. The eyes kept staring while my mind raced: What's wrong with Mom? Why did she push me away from her? Where is she? Where am I?

Slowly the children began to resume their play. First some and then all. As they played, I felt more and more as though I could move, but I didn't. When the tension eased, I began to look around the room.

The blue walls were paint-chipped and peeling. Night had now blackened the other side of two very large frosted windows on one side of the room. Above the worn wooden floor hung about half a dozen globe lamps. A high curb ran all the way around the room. I didn't know what it was for until I saw a little girl nearly run down by a speeding tricycle. The curb was for safety. Around the room, at the edge of the curb, there were four large pillars holding up the whole place. And straight across from me there were two doors with signs over them. One said "Boys"; and the other said "Girls."

I made my way around to the corner of the room behind one of the pillars. I sat down. I watched the kids

playing and fighting. They all seemed to want to ride the few bicycles and tricycles that were there, but only the bigger kids were on them. There was a large purple tricycle I really liked. I wondered how I might get a turn at riding it. Two boys entered the room and headed straight for the tricycle. They abruptly dumped the boy who was on the bike to the floor, and rode off laughing.

I drew up my legs and folded my arms over them. I laid my head sideways atop my arms and closed my eyes. I was getting sleepy.

“Get up from there!” snapped a gruff-sounding nun. She was towering above me and she was angry. “What are you doing down there?”

I was startled and groggy. I tried to get to my feet, when she pulled me up by my coat collar.

“I’m waiting for my mother.”

“Never mind that!” She began dragging me across the floor of the now empty room. I had obviously fallen asleep and all the children had gone home.

“But I’m waiting for my mother!” I garbled out through my tightly grasped coat collar.

In one great sweep she opened the door marked “Boys” and flung me through it. I staggered into a pitch-black darkness.

“Get along!”

“But, Sister...”

“Get along!”

She gathered a large chunk of my coat sleeve and arm and lifted part of me off the ground. I was forced through the darkness into a partially lighted room.

The room was long and narrow. On one side, separated by dark doorways, were small pink lights very close to the floor. They lit the bottom part of the room, making the top part seem dark and endless. Along the other wall, running the entire length of the room, was a row of beds, every two separated by barred windows. I was frightened.

She pushed me through one of the dark doorways. She flipped a switch, flooding the room with light. It was a bathroom, made of a million tiny white tiles. Floor, ceiling, walls, and everything. The first thing I thought of was Chicklets.

“Your number is twenty-seven. Don’t forget it!” She pointed to the far side of the room and a row of hooks with numbers above them. Most of the hooks had clothes hanging from them, some of them only pajamas.

“Do you have a toothbrush?”

Thinking of the one I had at home, I said, “Yes.”

“Wash, brush, and change. And don’t make a mess!” She left as quickly as she spoke, and I was glad. I was afraid of her.

I lifted the pair of pajamas off hook number twenty-seven. I sat on the long wooden bench under the hooks and looked around. There was a row of sinks on one side of the room and a row of toilets on the other. As I

changed into the pajamas, I couldn't stop the tears edging toward my eyes. I went over to one of the sinks and turned on the water. It was cold. I wet my face and looked around for a towel. There was none. I dabbed my wet face with my sleeve.

"What are you doing!" she screamed as she reentered the room. She really startled me.

"I want my mother," I cried.

She slapped my face so hard I felt a million needles of heat rush into my face and cheek.

"She's gone! Now stop that! Where's your toothbrush?"

"It's...it's..." I was in a race between breathing and speaking. "...at home."

From nowhere, she produced a paper-wrapped toothbrush and shoved it at me. I took it and brought it to my mouth to tear off the paper with my teeth. She slapped me again.

"That's not the way we do things around here!"

I held my stinging face. "I just wanted to take off the—"

"Well, that's not the way we do things around here." She left in a huff, mumbling to herself.

I found some toothpaste on one of the sinks and put some on the paper-wrapped brush. I brushed my teeth. It was yucky, but that's how she wanted it. When I finished brushing I stuck the brush in the back pocket of my hanging brown corduroy pants and went over to the doorway. I peeked out. She was at the far end of the darkened room at a desk with a small lighted lamp. I switched off the bathroom light and approached her. I stood in front of her desk. She ignored me. She got to her feet and brushed past me.

"Come on."

I followed her down the long row of beds. She stopped at bed number twenty-seven and pointed to it. Without another word she returned to her desk.

I gathered up the waist part of the pajamas and with great difficulty climbed up and into the very high white metal bed. There were bars at the top and bottom. I slipped beneath the cold sheets. There was a strong smell of rubber and the blanket was itchy.

I lay faceup trying to see the shapes on the dark ceiling. I could not. I heard an occasional cough and a snuffle. I heard a small voice call out so quietly I almost didn't hear it: "Sister Frances."

I waited for the response, but there was none. A warm tear ran down my cheek and into my ear. Where was I and why was I here? A streetlamp somewhere outside cast eerie shadows across the top of my bedcovers. In the gray light I wondered why Mom hadn't come back for me.

I awoke to the sounds of children's voices. I opened my eyes and looked around. The room looked different from the night before. It was bigger and brighter and it had a ceiling. Kids were running in all directions. I recognized a lot of them from the playroom. They hadn't gone home after all. There was a chest next to the bed.

I climbed down from the bed. Sister Frances wasn't at her desk. Instead, there was a younger nun. She was prettier, with dark eyebrows and a dimple on each cheek. She was fastening the shirt buttons for one of the

little kids. She was smiling.

I entered the bathroom. To my relief, all my things were still there. I hung the pajamas on the hook and stuffed the toothbrush into the top pocket. I didn't feel like brushing again. I dabbed a drop of water on each eye and dried with my shirt sleeve. I was too afraid to ask anyone where they got their towels and facecloths from, and besides, I didn't care. Mom would be here soon and I could go home. I put on my street coat and followed some of the boys out of the bathroom. They were lining up in front of the beds, so I did the same. I noticed I was the only one wearing my street coat. I guessed nobody else was leaving but me.

"Why not put your coat on your hook?" the nun with the dimples asked as she approached me.

"I'm going home," I said.

"Well, we're going to have breakfast first. Why not hang up your coat?"

I left the line and hung up my coat. When I returned, the dimpled nun was gone. I stood by the bed.

Sister Frances entered the room and the line stiffened. She was tall and thin. Her face was shiny and drawn. She spoke not a word, but rather made a clicking sound with a clicker she held down by her side. I remembered having one of those clickers. I got it in a box of Cracker Jacks. With each click the children responded, and I followed. We shuffled down a maze of hallways until we reached a dining room.

It was an enormous room, very much like the lunchroom at school. It had rows and rows of tables, with a dozen or so chairs at each table. As we entered the room, we weaved like a snake around the rows of tables; girls entering from the other side did the same. At the sound of a click, we stopped. On the next, we turned. There in front of me was chair number twenty-seven. I sat. A terrible pain ripped into my left ear. Sister Frances had grapped hold of my ear and lifted me out of the chair. She clicked the others to sit before she let go of me.

"Sit when you're supposed to, and not a moment before!" She pointed to a spot behind the chair. "Now, stand there!"

I stood where she pointed. I stared at the ceiling, trying not to cry. The ceiling in this room looked exactly like the one in the playroom. It had the same globe lamps and the same tiny cracks. I wondered what time Mom might come for me. What was this place, and why were all these kids here? I hoped I wouldn't have to stay too much longer. I didn't like Sister Frances—she hurt me. The kids took forever to eat. The room smelled like waffles or pancakes, I didn't know which, and I wasn't about to look down to find out.

A sharp click brought me back to the room, and the kids to their feet. The next series of clicks took us from the dining room, down a few more hallways to some sort of playroom with a green-and-white-tiled floor. As the line entered the room, the kids broke ranks. They ran for the things they most wanted to play with. I stayed by the door.

One whole wall of the room was made up of glass doors. A few of the panes were cracked, while others were missing altogether. They had been replaced by panels of wood. The doors opened out onto a gray-stone courtyard with a high wire-mesh fence. There were shelves along two of the walls, with all sorts of playthings: games, puzzles, toys, blocks, and balls. A number of tables, with painted checkerboard tops, and chairs were scattered about the room.

I took a seat at the table nearest the door. I ran my fingernail along the edge of one of the painted checkerboards to see if it would move. It didn't. I watched the kids playing and fighting. I felt terribly alone.

Maybe Mom was mad at me for something. If I had done something bad, it must have been terrible. I couldn't remember what it was.

"Who are you?" A voice jolted me. There were four boys standing around me. "Who are you?" one of them repeated in a tough manner.

"Twenty-seven," I said without thinking. They roared with laughter before I had a chance to correct myself. "Jennings. My name is Jennings," I said over their laughter.

"What's your first name?" the same boy asked in an equally tough manner.

"That is my first name."

They laughed even louder. The boy who spoke was bigger and older than nearly every kid in the room. He had black curly hair and a few pimples around his chin and near his temples. He announced to everyone in the room that my name was Jenny. I tried correcting him, but I got tongue-tied. They laughed more. The embarrassment made my tears come easily. I clenched my fists and tried to stand, but he grabbed my wrist and flung me back into the chair.

"Look! He's not a boy, he's a girl." He pointed his finger at me. "His name is Jenny and he cries!"

I tried wiping my tears with every dry thing I had, my sleeves, my fingers, the palms of my hands. I insisted I wasn't crying, and wasn't a girl, but nobody heard me. I covered my face with my hands as the laughter and the boys faded away.

"I don't think you're a girl."

I removed my hands and saw a boy about my age sitting across from me.

"I'm *not* a girl. I'm a boy!"

"My name is Mark and my number is nine," he said rather proudly. He was short and chubby and wore a large pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His hair was dark and lay flat on his head, except for a few cowlicks that stuck up from the back. He sort of looked like an owl.

"That's a nice number," I said. "My name is Jennings and I'm twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven!" he exclaimed with a jolt of his head. "Years old?"

"No." I laughed. "Twenty-seven is my number. I'm only eight and a half years old."

It was the first time I had laughed since I'd arrived.

"Don't pay no attention to those jerks," he said as he flipped his thumb in their direction. "They pick on everybody. All the time!"

I wasn't really listening to what he was saying. I asked, "Where are we?"

"The day room." He looked somewhat surprised at my question.

"No. I mean this whole place."

“Oh! It’s the Home of the Angels.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. My face told him I still didn’t know where I was.

“It’s a home. Ya know, a home...for orphan and foster kids.”

“A home?” I was numb. “For orphans?”

He shook his head. “Uh-hum.”

“Am I am orphan?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“I don’t know. My mother brought me here. She said she’d be right back...”

“Well, then, you’re a foster kid,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I am? I’m a foster kid?”

“U-hum.”

“What’s a foster kid?”

“Oh, boy!” He pushed his index finger at his glasses as though they were about to fall off his face. “A foster kid is...uh...he’s a kid who’s got parents. But! They don’t want him no more.”

“My mother wants me!” I snapped.

Mark sat calmly where he was. Slowly he spoke. “Then why are you here?”

I couldn’t answer that question. My lower lip began to quiver.

“Oh, boy! Ya know,” he said, “it’s better to be a foster kid than an orphan.”

“Why’s that?” I squeaked out. The tears were edging toward my eyelids. I was trying to fight them off.

“Well, a foster kid gets to leave this place.”

“Oh, yeah?” I blinked. I quickly wiped a runaway tear. “Will Mom come for me? Will I go home soon?”

“Well...I don’t know about that, but foster kids sometimes go and live in people’s houses.”

“People’s houses? What people’s houses?”

“I don’t know, just people. They come and take one kid or another. Just people.”

“I don’t wanna live in people’s houses.”

“Oh, boy,” he said with a huff.

I guess I got him mad at me, because he stopped talking.

"Are they nice people?" I asked. I wanted him to talk to me again.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm an orphan."

"You mean an orphan don't get to live in people's houses?"

Again he pushed back his glasses. "Most don't. Some do, the little ones. But most don't."

"Did you ever—?"

"No!" He cut me off quickly. "Nobody wants a fat ugly four-eyes."

His response startled me.

"It ain't so bad." He looked around, almost talking to himself. "Once you get to learn all the rules...it ain't so bad."

"How long have you been here?"

"I've always been here! Nobody wanted me when I was little, so I've always been here. You want to play checkers?"

I nodded my head. He slipped away to get the playing pieces. I couldn't believe Mom didn't want me anymore. I tried to remember what bad thing I did for Mom to leave me here.

Mark returned. We played two games of checkers. Neither of us spoke very much. I lost both games.

"You don't play very well, do you?"

"I guess I'm just not paying too much attention. I want to go home."

"Now, that's rule number one!" he shot back sternly. "Don't ever think about going home!"

"But I want to."

"I know you want to. We all do. Well, maybe not home, but someplace." He pushed back his glasses. "But you can't go around all day thinking about it. You'll go nuts!" He shook his head as he began setting up the pieces for the next game.

"It's hard not to think about it," I murmured.

"I know. But you'll get used to it. You have to."

We began another game. I tried to obey rule number one, but it was just too hard. I didn't like this place and I wanted to go home.

A click stopped us in mid-move. The next click sent everyone scurrying around the room forming lines. I stood behind Mark to wait for the next click. I hoped it was for lunch. I was starving.

We shuffled our way back through the same maze of hallways to the dining room. As we snaked around the rows of tables, I tried to pick up a hint of what we might be having. Only rolls and butter could be seen. We stopped on a click and turned on the next. I was standing in front of chair number ten. Instantly I was pushed aside by the boy who owned the number. Lost and in trouble again, I closed my eyes and covered my ears as

I caught sight of Sister Frances' angry face heading toward me. She grabbed me by the hair and dragged me to chair twenty-seven. She clicked the others to sit. Her free hand was digging straight into my shoulder. All I could do was scrunch up my head and neck and wait. Needless to say, again I did not sit or eat.

Lunch seemed so much longer than breakfast. I paid no attention to the snickers of the other kids. Instead, I studied the kid in chair twenty-six. He had dirty blond hair and large funny ears. I didn't see the front of his face. But I only cared about the back of his head.

Lunch ended with my eyes still glued to the back of twenty-six's head. I thought about Mark saying once you learn the rules, it ain't so bad. If I didn't learn the rules, I was going to starve to death.

The snake slid into a school-type playroom. There were rows of desks toward the front, with play tables and chairs in the rear. There were three large blackboards in the front part of the room, with chalk scribbles all over them. A little old nun, about a hundred years old maybe, sat in one corner of the room half-reading and half-sleeping.

The kids got right into drawing and coloring and painting. I sat with my back against one of the blackboards. The light rain suddenly turned heavy, very heavy. It slapped against the wall of glass doors. A clap of lightning followed by a roll of thunder caused a number of oohs and aahs. I kept my eyes on number twenty-six.

"What are you looking at?" Mark asked as he took a seat next to me.

"It's not a what, it's a who. Twenty-six!"

"I'm sorry I didn't realize you were behind me."

"It's not your fault."

"Well, I shoulda watched." He stuck his hand under his shirt and pulled out a roll.

"It's the best I could do," he said as he handed it to me. "I ate everything else."

I snatched up the roll and ate it. It disappeared in about two bites. It would have gone in one if my mouth had been a little bigger.

"I'll make sure you're in the right spot for dinner."

"I'll make sure I'm in the right spot from now on," I said, with my eyes wide and my tongue hanging out. "If I don't..." I mimicked my last words by making believe I hung myself.

We were playing tic-tac-toe on the blackboard and laughing about the little nun sleeping in the corner when we were interrupted.

"What are you laughing at, fatso?"

It was the same four boys who had picked on me earlier. The curly-headed pimple-faced kid again did the talking. He was obviously addressing Mark.

"I asked you something, fatso. You deaf or something?"

Mark ignored him and drew another set of lines for our game. I was nervous, but I followed Mark's lead. I

placed an X in one of the squares.

“Hey, everybody! We got a deaf dumbo and a little girl over here. They’re writing their names in boxes.” He managed to get everyone laughing.

Mark seemed to be very natural at ignoring him. I had to work hard at it. They leveled a few more remarks, mostly at Mark but some at me, before they moved off to bother someone else.

“Doesn’t he bother you?” I asked.

“Sure he does. But I’m not gonna let him know it. He just wants someone to fight with. That’s all. He says lots of things to get you mad. And when you do...Wham! He lets you have it. He thinks he’s the toughest kid in here.”

“Is he?”

“Yeah. I guess so. But one of these days...” He made a gesture in the air with his fist. “Butch...is gonna get it.”

“Is that his name? Butch!”

“Yeah.” He placed an O in a box.

“Did you ever notice how all the tough kids are named Butch?” I asked.

He laughed. “I guess they wouldn’t be so tough if their names were Felix or Elmer or something.”

“Maybe they’d be tougher.”

We laughed. We stopped at the same time to look around for Butch. He wasn’t there. We laughed harder.

“I got two tough brothers. Well, maybe more mean than tough.”

“Are their names Butch?” He laughed.

“No. George and Walter.”

“And they’re mean? Why do you say they’re mean?”

“Ah! They’re always picking on Larry and me.” I mimicked them, “Do this and do that.”

“Who’s Larry?”

“Oh! He’s another brother.”

“Another one! How many you got?”

“Five.”

“Five!” He leaned back as though he were about to faint. “I never heard of anybody with five brothers. Do you have any sisters?”

“No. Not no more. I had one, Mary Ann, but she died a little while after she was born.”

“Did she just die?”

“Oh, no. She died a long time ago. She would’ve been six just two weeks ago. October 5. I know her birthday ’cause Mom always cries a lot on her birthday. When’s your birthday?”

“Uh...” I surprised him with the question. “I don’t got no birthday. At least I don’t know when it is.”

“How old are you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe eight or nine. Something like that. Are all your brothers older than you?” He seemed to want to change the subject away from himself.

“No. I got four older and one younger.” I made a face when I said the word “younger.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Oh, nothing. Gene’s just a pest, that’s all. He’s four.” I curled the corners of my mouth. “What a pest!”

“Is he in a home too?”

I was stunned by the thought. Tears began to well up in my eyes. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Oh, boy. I’m sorry I asked. We won’t talk about your brothers no more.” He went about drawing another set of lines on the board.

“It’s all right,” I said weakly. I blinked away the thought of Gene being in a place like this.

“Naa. I don’t want you to start bawling on me.”

“I’m not bawling!” I insisted. “We can talk about my brothers if you want to.”

“I like to hear about brothers and things like that.”

“Well, George’s my oldest brother,” I said as I marked an X in the upper-right-hand corner. “He’s real good at stickball. He can hit three sewers!”

“What’s three sewers?”

“Oh! That’s like hitting the ball a whole block.”

“Wow!” His eyes widened. “That’s far.”

“Yeah. He’s pretty strong. He’d be a real good brother if he didn’t drink and get real mean and argue with Mom.”

“He drinks? How old is he?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen! And he drinks!”

I nodded my head.

“Don’t your father hit him or nothing?”

“I ain’t got no father. He died in the war a long time ago.”

“Well, what about your mother? Don’t she hit him?”

“No. She’s afraid of him. We’re all afraid of him, except maybe Walter. He’s not afraid of him. He fights with him all the time.”

“How old is he?”

“Fourteen. He’s real smart.” I raised my eyebrows. “He’s always studying and thinking.”

Click!

I froze, but nobody else did.

“What’s happening?”

“I gotta go to class,” Mark said as he wiped the chalk from his hands on the back of his pants. “All lifers go to class now. I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t I go?”

“No. You’re not a lifer, you’re a part-timer.”

“A part-timer?”

“Yeah. I don’t got time to explain it to you now, but I will later.” He left to join a line that was leaving the room.

I shot a quick glance around the room. Luckily, twenty-six was still there.

The room was quieter now. Butch was gone and so were his friends. Most of the kids who were left were drawing or coloring, or just sitting and thinking. They were probably all breaking rule number one, but then again, so was I. The rain continued to fall heavily against the glass doors. I wondered where all my brothers were. Could they be in places like this? I was hungry. I found myself really hoping the clicker would sound. I was sure the next one would be for dinner.

Sharp stabs of lightning and the roll of thunder frightened some of the kids. Finally the clicker sounded.

As I and the snake weaved its way around the tables, I smelled the food. I had no idea what it was, but I didn’t care. I stopped on the click and turned. I waited years for the one that would let me sit and eat.

Click!

About a foot from me was a large stack of white bread, just standing there. I wanted to grab a piece, but I was afraid. I waited for someone else to grab first. Nobody did. One of the kids took a drink of his milk. I did the same. I never realized how good milk tasted.

I saw a few nuns wearing aprons tied around their necks and waists. They were carrying large bowls of something. One of them reached my table. I watched her serve stew to every kid at the table. By the time she

got to me, I had already dreamed of eating everyone's stew. It was great. She scooped up a large ladle of stew and dumped it into my bowl. It smelled wonderful. I rechecked what everyone else was doing. They were eating. I lifted my spoon and dived in. I ate everything in the bowl and about three pieces of bread. It wasn't until the kid next to me slid his unfinished bowl in front of me that I realized the stew really didn't have much of a taste. I smiled at him and ate his too.

Click!

It was over. I grabbed up a slice of bread and stuffed it into my shirt. The clicks took me and the line from the dining room. We entered the playroom.

Mark and I sat on the curb. We lifted our legs each time a cycle came too close, and placed them back down again in unison.

"What's a part-timer?" I asked. "And why don't they go to school?"

"They got no room for everybody. A part-timer ain't gonna be here all that long. You'll either go home or be lent out to live with somebody." He added quickly, "Don't go bawling on me, now. It don't mean you will be lent out. I was just using that as a for-instance."

"I'm not going to bawl."

"Good! Lifers are here all the time. So we go to school. See?"

"Yeah. I see."

"So tell me about your other two brothers. Larry and the other one. What's his name?"

"Jerome."

"Yeah. Tell me about Larry and Jerome."

"Well, I can't tell you too much about Jerome. I never met him."

"You never met him? You never met your own brother?" He was startled.

"No. He's in a hospital somewhere, dying."

"Dying? Dying of what?"

"A heart condition. My mother said we had to pray for him 'cause he was going to die pretty soon."

"How soon?"

"I don't know. Pretty soon."

"How old is he?"

"He's...ah, let me think.... He's about ten. He's been in the hospital for as long as I can remember."

"He's a lifer, then, like me."

"Yeah. I guess so. I hadn't ever thought about it like that, but I guess so."

“Is Larry gonna die too?”

“No.” I chuckled. “He thinks he is sometimes. He’s always being picked on to do this and do that. George and Walter take turns making him do things around the house like cleaning and doing the dishes and stuff like that. Mom works nights for the phone company and sleeps during the day. So George and Walter sort of run things.”

“Butch would fit in real good there.” He laughed.

“He sure would. Walter calls Larry the ‘dumb ox’ and George calls him ‘four-eyes.’” I shot a glance at Mark as he pushed his glasses back on his face. “I’m sorry. I don’t call him ‘four—’”

“It’s okay. They call everybody with glasses ‘four-eyes.’”

“Well, I don’t. I don’t call him ‘dumb ox,’ either. I like Larry. He’s my favorite brother.”

“I think I would like Larry, too. I think I would like to have all your brothers.”

“Oh, no you wouldn’t!”

“Well, I don’t have any brothers. So I wouldn’t mind a pesty one, or even a mean one, just so long as I had one.”

I hadn’t ever thought about it like that. I turned it over in my mind. “No, Mark. You wouldn’t like just any kind of brother. You’d like a good one, like Larry, but not just any kind.”

We lifted our legs once again as the big purple tricycle zoomed past.

“What does it take to get a ride on that bike?” I asked.

“Guts!” He laughed.

“I saw Butch and his friends throw a kid to the floor last night.”

“That’s why it takes guts. And they’re not his friends!”

“Oh! I thought they were his friends.”

“No. There are no friends in here. They just hang around him and laugh when he laughs. They don’t want him to pick on them.”

“What do you mean there are no friends in here? Aren’t we friends?”

He didn’t answer me. He sat looking out across the floor at the kids playing and fighting.

“Hey! I’m tired. Want to go to bed?” He stretched and shook as though he had a chill.

“Sure. Okay.” I knew he didn’t want to answer me. And he knew I knew.

We dashed across the speedway, laughing the whole route. There were only a few kids in the dormitory, and no nuns. We reached Mark’s bed first, and he veered off.

“I’ll meet you in the bathroom,” he said. His arms were outstretched and he made the sound of a plane.

I reached bed number twenty-seven and decided to look through the small cabinet alongside the bed to see what was in it. I found a bar of soap, some toothpaste, a towel and facecloth, and a laundry bag. I took everything but the laundry bag and rejoined Mark in the bathroom.

I changed into the pajamas and hung my things on the hook. I washed and dried my face and put toothpaste on the paper-wrapped brush. I began brushing my teeth.

“What are you doing?” Mark said with laughter in his voice.

“I’m brushing my teeth,” I garbled out, the brush still sticking out of my mouth.

“Don’t you take the paper off first?”

“I tried to take it off last night, but I got hit for it.”

“Really?”

“Really! Sister Frances hit me. She gave me the brush, and when I tried to take the paper off with my teeth, she hit me! She said, ‘That’s not the way we do things around here!’”

Mark went hysterical with laughter. I thought he liked the way I mimicked Sister Frances’ voice, but I was wrong.

“She didn’t mean not to take the paper off.” He laughed. “She meant not to take it off with your teeth!”

We laughed so hard I thought I was going to burst. My foaming mouth only made us laugh harder. I tried picking some of the soggy paper off my brush and out of my mouth.

Sister Frances passed the bathroom and stuck her head in. “Shut up in here!” she scolded.

Mark and I finished our laughing in silence, or at least as silently as we could. We were just wiping the last of the water off the sinks when I asked, “Mark, what did you mean before when you said there ain’t no friends in here?”

I’m sure he didn’t like the question, but I had to know the answer.

“Well, it’s a rule. Not a home rule like when to sit or when to eat, or like that, but a kids’ rule...” He paused. “A kids’ rule, one you’re supposed to learn on your own ’cause nobody likes to talk about it. You know what I mean?”

My face showed him I didn’t.

“Oh, boy!” he said. “It’s like this. If you got a friend in here and they go away someplace, then you’re left by yourself, alone. And if you keep making friends and they keep going away, then over and over again you’re alone.” He paused. “It hurts.”

Mark dashed from the room. He knew he’d said more than he wanted to.

I left the bathroom. I didn’t agree with what Mark said. I thought having a friend would make things easier. But then, I wasn’t a lifer, and he was. I put my things in the cabinet beside the bed and started to climb up.

“Where are you going?” Mark startled me out of my thoughts.

“To bed. Shouldn’t I?”

He shook his head no and waved his hand for me to follow him. We walked to Sister Frances’ desk. She was not there. A few kids were already lining up in front of the desk.

“What are we waiting for?”

“Shhhh,” came the response from every kid there. I shut up. I couldn’t imagine what we were waiting for. Just then a nun entered the dormitory. She was the same nun I saw earlier that morning buttoning the boy’s shirt and smiling. She was smiling again. Without knowing her, I liked her.

“Good evening, children,” she said warmly.

I was shocked. I didn’t think anyone big was ever going to talk nice to us kids.

“Good evening, Sister Clair.” The children responded almost in song.

She pulled out a key from a pocket and inserted it into the lock of a cabinet on the wall behind the desk. As she turned the key, all the kids turned it with her. It was the strangest thing. When she opened the cabinet door, I understood. The cabinet was filled with all sorts of stuffed animals. Bears and dogs and monkeys and rabbits and everything. I was so excited.

She removed the animals one at a time. She placed each animal in the arms of the one who most wanted that particular animal. The others’ arms remained outstretched and wanting.

“Don’t you want one?” she asked. She was looking directly at me.

I nodded my head. I did. I hadn’t realized I had wrapped both my arms around my own body as though I were hugging all the animals. I guess because my arms were not outstretched and open, she thought I might not want one. I raised my arms. She smiled broadly and placed a fuzzy brown-and-white dog with black floppy ears in my arms. I cradled the dog to my chest and tucked his big nose under my chin. I walked back to the bed. I made a nice little place for the dog next to my pillow, placed him down gently, and climbed in after him.

“What’s your name?” I asked. I paused as though I were giving him time to answer me. “Oh, Doggie. That’s a nice name. My name is Jennings.” He did not laugh.

I slipped down beneath the covers and pulled Doggie down after me. I cuddled him close to me.

“My mother brought me here. She said she’d be right back.... I guess she got busy doing something else. ’cause she really loves me and wants me.... Yeah! That’s it! She got very busy. She’ll be here soon to take me home, and you can come with me. Would you like that?”

He said he would, and I was happy.

“I’m going to ask Mom to take Mark home, too. With all my brothers around, she won’t even notice an extra kid.”

“Jennings.”

I was startled by a voice. I poked my head from beneath the covers to see Sister Clair standing above me.

"Hello," I said, and grinned. "I was just saying hello to Doggie. I'm sorry if I made too much noise."

"No, no. You weren't making any noise. I just came by to say hello. May I sit down?" She smiled.

"Yes, Sister." I pushed back on my elbows to lift myself up a little.

"I'm as new here as you are," she said. "I started here the day before you came."

"Do you know where my mother is?"

"Your mother went away to rest. She wasn't feeling very well. You know, it's hard for her to raise all you boys all by herself and hold down a job at the same time. And it's hard for her to face Jerome being sick. Do you know about Jerome?"

I nodded my head.

"Well, you have to be a strong soldier until your mother is better. All right?"

"All right," I said as I started to cry.

Sister Clair put both her arms around me and held me.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I saw was the morning sun. I wanted to show Doggie.

"Hey, Doggie," I whispered. I lifted the cover to retrieve him but he wasn't there.

"Hey, Doggie. Where are you?" I felt around the tightly tucked edges of the bed, but still, no Doggie. I stretched my neck out as far over the side of the bed as possible without falling to the floor. No Doggie. I'd lost him.

I pulled myself back up and slid deep beneath the covers. As quietly as I could, I cried.

A sharp rap to my ankles and a shout, "Last one up's a rotten egg!" brought my head from beneath the covers.

"Come on, Jennings!" Mark shouted from the bathroom doorway, then disappeared inside.

I climbed down from the bed, took my things from the cabinet, glanced once more under the bed, then followed Mark.

He was at his hook when I reached mine.

"Hi, sleepyhead," he said.

"Hi."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! When you look like that?"

I looked around to see that nobody was within earshot of me. "I lost Doggie." My lip quivered.

“Oh, boy.” He chuckled.

“It’s not funny. I lost him. I looked everywhere.”

“You didn’t lose him. They took him.”

“They took him? Who took him?”

“The nuns did.” He turned and took his shirt from the hook.

“Why?”

“Why?” he said impatiently without looking at me. “They just do, that’s all. After we go to sleep.” He looked at me. A slight moistness covered his eyes, and he swallowed. “They come around and collect them.”

“But why?”

“It’s the rules!” he snapped. “They cage the animals at night! It’s the rules.”

2

After breakfast, Sister Frances told everyone who wanted to go out in the courtyard to get their coats.

The sun was bright but not warm. I walked to the far side of the yard and sat down. I was very careful not to have stepped on any lines, and there were lots of them. The yard was made up of hundreds of squares. Great for box ball or hit the stick. Three sides of the yard were bordered by the high wire-mesh fence. Each section of the fence was separated by a pole. I sat between two of the poles. The fence gave way a little as I leaned back on it. I looked for Mark.

He hadn’t come into the yard. I wondered why not. I watched the boys on one side of the yard and the girls on the other. The boys played ball or Johnny-ride-the-pony, while the girls skipped rope. I was amazed to see how many girls in this world had ropes. All of them.

“Hi! What’s your name?”

I looked up to see a little girl looking down at me. She had fluffy blond hair that was pulled into two bunches, then tied with blue ribbons. Her cheeks were freckled. Her eyes were blue and sparkly.

“Hi.”

“What’s your name?” she asked again.

“Jennings,” I said weakly. I wasn’t at all used to talking to girls.

“Jennings! What’s your first name?”

“That is my first name.”

“My name is Stacy. Stacy Ann Perry. Can I sit down?”

Before I could even think of an answer, she was sitting. “Uh...yeah. Sure.”

“How old are you?”

“Uh...eight and a half.”

“Me too! Well, almost eight and a half. Are you a part-timer or a lifer?”

“Uh...part-timer.”

“Yeah, me too. My mother is having a baby. Probably a girl. I asked her to have a girl. I’d love to have a sister. Do you have any sisters?”

I couldn’t believe how fast she could talk. “Uh...no. I got brothers.”

“Brothers. That’s nice. How many brothers do you have?”

“Five.”

“Five. That’s nice. I don’t have...Five! That’s a lot of brothers. Are they all in here?”

“Uh...no. They’re...I don’t know where they are.”

“Oh. Do you like it here?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“No. I don’t either. My mother says if I behave myself, she’ll buy me a doll when I get home.”

I looked around the yard from time to time to see if any of the boys saw me with a girl. They hadn’t. I still didn’t see Mark anywhere. She talked so fast and about so many different things, it was hard to keep up with her. I smiled every so often and grunted a little; that seemed to satisfy her. Finally I spotted Mark.

“I think my friend wants me,” I said. I got to my feet.

“Oh. All right.” She seemed disappointed.

“I’ll see you later.” I smiled weakly and backed away.

“All right!” She brightened up. “I’ll see you later.”

Mark was playing box ball with a milky-white skinny kid with sandy brown hair and two giant front teeth. He looked like a beaver.

“Can I play the winner?” I asked.

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