

1/ 34 Benevolent St.

Max unbuckled his padded, over-priced car seat. He pushed open the back door of the VW by himself. He and Leo jumped from the van. They dragged their spry feet through the pebbles of the driveway white and gray as an old man's hair.

Max's mom, Abby had heroically *nurtured* the red and white van into the pebbly driveway, she said with a laugh. It was no surprise. It was the way of moms to sacrifice for the sake of the kids and the marriage, Max remembered, sharing the thought with Leo. Nurtured? Max had experienced it first-hand. He didn't need a dictionary definition. It was nearly a homophone for a dark word starting with "m" and *nearly* its antonym, said Abby to him. Max was three and half years old.

It was noon. A bright winter sun warmed Max on his way into a small duplex. Max lived there. The duplex was in swishy Santa Fe, *New Mexico*. It was in the U.S. of A., not in Mexico, as more than a few ignorant persons have thought. And surely ignorance is not bliss, Max had discovered long ago.

Max's home was Apartment #1 at 34 Benevolent St., zip 87501. A zip was a code. But it was not a very secret code, frankly. It was also a number. *Thirty-four* Benevolent was a number too, Max gathered. In the apartment's small kitchen, he climbed into his wooden high chair. It'd be last time he climbed it, if he had anything to say about it. He'd outgrown it long ago, in his opinion.

Sidney popped into the kitchen from the studio. He was Max's dad. Casually, he fingering the day's mail. He said, "A zip is a cool device. Why include city or state, when it's redundant?"

It wasted your time. Our time is the most valuable thing we have, I say, if I may be thoughtful in front of the Max,” he said, when Abby chimed in,

“And our leisure time? It’s for the life of contemplation, according to the Philosopher.”

Abby and Sidney were Max’s parents. He had to deal with them. He had to live with them. What better choice had he? Twenty-nine, Abby was a tall, dirty blond with a thick waist and broad shoulders. Thirty-two, Sidney was tree-tall.

“Gramma Weinstein recalls a time without zips, she told me once. The old brutch,” said Sidney next, trying to be witty, watching his lingo. “But that was before You-Know-Who did not create the world,” he said, overly sarcastic at times. It made him sound like a punk, Abby said, not acrimoniously.

Apartment # 1 was a ground-floor, three room pad with low ceilings. The ceilings were covered with Costco’s Styrofoam panels. It had a yucky carpeted and a dated kitchen, a single bathroom tiled in black and red, and two bedrooms. The larger of the bedrooms had converted into Sidney’s noisy workshop. He, Abby, and baby Lizabeth bunked in the smaller bedroom. It had a spacious walk-in closet with a good-sized window. The walk-in ruled as sleeping quarters for Max and Leo,

Abby fronted the Kelvinator, standing tall in her plain kitchen. She had time left over to fix a healthy lunch, she said, from not cleaning the fridge *perfectly*. She hated house-cleaning like the devil, but always got around to it eventually, Max heard his mom ar-tic-u-late. After all, she was a civilized adult.

To a restive Sidney, Abby said, “I could care less about a perfectly clean fridge. I’d rather get ready for tonight’s seminar than clean with my time,” she added, cinching her new white apron mucking around the fridge door swung wide-open. The apron said, “Feminity Rules,” his mom

proudly told Max.

Abby was nattily dressed in a floral peasant's skirt from Oaxaca and a white cotton blouse. There were threads of gold and red embroidery on its short, elastic sleeves. She wore a pair of soft leather mocs. But if the Trading Store hadn't had a super sale, she'd never afforded a pair of beautiful Indian mocs of this quality. Abby had the habits of an earth-mother at times, she confessed right there in the kitchen. She was an entomologist practicing her trade at a low level just now.

Abby had one prestigious degree. But one was not enough, apparently. On Monday and Thursday nights, she broke her brain at the stinky Great Books College for a second degree. It was useless for her professional, but useful personal growth hypothetically.

What was a second degree? Max asked himself. He was malcontent in his high chair, waiting there for a super healthy lunch.

A second degree? It was when a kid like Max was quizzed about private stuff. It was when he was quizzed by a nosy guy like his friend, pious Richard. Earlier in the day, Richard *noodged* Max to tell him a secret about Leo. Diffidently, Max ignored the question. He would not tell it to a living soul, if he had a secret about Leo. Not Abby or Sidney. He was the kind of guy that could keep a secret.

Max was tallish for his age. His bod' had the toned physique of a swimmer. His leonine head of wheaten curls fell over large ears and a slim neck, hiding his mom's sea-blue eyes and his dad's pale skin. Pronto, it needed a good haircut.

Leo's appearance was not *that* dissimilar to that of Max roughly speaking, especially if you looked inside of him. The same might be said of his activities. Leo, the lion, was Max's closest, best friend. He was a bosom bud.

Sidney jerked a Tecate from the Kelvinator. Max was kicking his the heels of his red Velcro sneakers against the legs of his high chair. Abby slaved away at the kitchen counter. She dropped two slices of Bunny Bread into the toaster, saying to her man, “It’s the only bread the kids will eat these days, darn it,” saying next, “On the way home from the Turquoise City Mall, Max and I visited with Richard. Very pleasant, cookies and a strong coffee. Civilized conversation,” she said, whipping up a batch of egg salad.

“Visited with Richard? How’s my hero doin’ these days, the dufus?” Sidney asked. “I can’t make up my mind, honestly, if he’s a plus or a minus in our lives,” he said next.

Not worrying about Richard, Sidney spread four army-green placemats on the kitchen table. He was dressed in a pair of paint-splashed overalls and the heavy tan work boots. He’d substituted the boots for the stinky old flip flops he often wore in the studio. He snipped a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his pudgy nose. On his chin was a dark goatee. When not *creating* in the studio, Sidney’s preferred dress was a gray Dead-Head’s tee, blue jeans, and the leather sandals. He was, loosely speaking, a starving artist with an MFA from NYU.

In the Santa Fe arts community, Sidney was taken to be clever and Abby kind of witty, as long as it didn’t get too cute. If it didn’t get saccharine, they, in turn, liked to hang around witty, clever friends. Both were the curious type, but shy about being slightly pedantic. Hoping not to be dilettantes nor to be perfunctory, they were the mom and dad Max lived with, he reminded himself, no longer kicking the chair. He lived with them unless he chose to run away, like to an orphanage or to a friend’s house for a while, if he had it him. It’s the plight of every child that has his parents living with him. Stuck with them, he adjusts to their habits. He takes in their language (of which he’s an echo), their ideas (he normally accedes to), their values, their weaknesses, their food, housing, and a thousand other idiosyncrasies, G-d help him!

About the apparent fatality of our early childhood, Sidney's cousin James had a funny anecdote. James' dad had grown up poor during the Depression. Now he was a successful physician, made a nice living, the family lived a good, plentiful life. Yet his dad was typically fond of telling James of his Depression poverty, his paucity of food, toys, and of other privations as a child, until one day James, age six, brightly said,

“Dad, aren't you glad you're living with us now?”

Chopping eggs, Abby said, “Can't make up your mind about Richard, you say? Are you kidding, Sid? Surely, he's a big plus. And, please, don't call him a dufus. What if Richard had the magical Gyges ring on his finger? With its power to make him invisible, he heard you say this?” she asked, giving Max a big wink. Squirming in his high chair, Max awaited his half of an egg-salad sandwich, please. He was learning to be patient, and didn't like it much, when Sidney said, placing three glasses of apple juice on the table,

“If Richard stood right here invisible, I'm not sure he'd do anything. Half of the time he reminds me of his stories. All talk and no action, Jackson,” said Sidney, when Abby answered,

“All talk and no action? Better than all action, Jackson, and no thought,” she said caustically, giving her man *the look*. It was a pointed look, hinting Sidney might lack in the thought department at times, Max guessed.

Standing by the white porcelain sink and chopping at six eggs in a glass bowl, Abby said next, “You two are quite *simpatico*, I think. You can speak your mind to Richard, at least. And vice-versa. That's not nothing, that's a friend. Can't speak your mind, not a friend. Just think of Richard as a big-hearted clown with a sad face. Is he immature or precocious at times, reminding you of a Salinger character? Yes. But maybe it's because he's retained the inner child. He has a tendency toward depression. So? Normally, it's when he forgets or refuses to

take his pills. Each of us is depressed at times, some more than others. According to the old humor theory, the ancients got this. We're up, we're down. Some more down than up for the duration. Pessimist, optimist. It's for the survival of the species. One warns us of danger, the other brings promise. For living well, we need both," Abby said in talkative flow, saying next, "An issue bigger than this? In times of danger *or* of promise, filter the real from the illusory, then illusion from delusion," she not surprisingly lectured, adding,

"Richard is my friend and your friend. Don't disrespect it. If we were to lose Richard from our lives, we'd lose something money can't buy. Something valuable and spiritual, I might add. He's probably the brightest and the most intuitive among the three of us, isolated as we are. Then, a guy with a sense of humor. How rare is that?" Abby responded.

It was a hungry Sidney's turn to get in a few words, please, when he said, "Rare, agreed. Still, he's not very far from being a spoiled rich kid and a bit soft."

"Never mind soft," Abby said, no longer chopping. "It takes a hardy, hardened soul to work at the shelter. I've seen him dish out some tough love there. Don't doubt it. Then, this so-called spoiled rich kid. Don't you engage in a presumption too quickly before you've the facts. In all of the four years of college as I knew him there, Richard had a part time job. Then a summer job, and he was on scholarship. However he got his present bankroll, he happens to be our loan company, our loan officer, and our financial safety net these days. God forbid, he calls in our debts. With his roller-coaster personality, up down, down up, it might come at any time. Don't under-estimate him. There are many sides to Richard, and you've only seen one or two. I've seen him go from very down to very up in a matter of hours ... or minutes, or the reverse.

"Then, he is ... or should I say, was a visionary. Believe it. At Swarthmore, he told me in advance I'd get a ninety-four or -five on a final. I got a ninety-four and a half. A week before

graduation, he predicted the college Prez would be sick on graduation day. The stuffy, old dude had a heart attack. Richard's had visits from the great writers and thinkers of the past, it seems. Now he's never exactly told me this, of course. But I've picked up hints. After all, he knows their work by heart. He's worth staying with. Losing Richard would be like losing Leo. Surely you don't want that to happen," Abby concluded.

"Lose Leo? No, of course not," answered Sidney, saying, "But not every parent encourages this Leo sort of thing. Take my dad, for example. With a tongue-lashing, he had crushed a child's fantasy before it got off ground. Surely, I'm not going to repeat that behavior with Max or Liz. Okay, you win. Cynically, Uncle Brady used to tell me, 'if you have one real friend in a lifetime, you'll be a lucky man.' Maybe he was right. I really do love Richard. And I mean it," said Sidney. His dad was, from Max's viewpoint, a bit abrupt on this winter day. Sidney was a little grumpy over the d-mn messy apartment, to quote him, or something.

*