

THE PARENT CURSE A STORY FOR THE YOUNG AT HEART

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Chapter One: Game of Imagination

"It's the bottom of the ninth, game tied with bases loaded and the pressure is on for Ace in relief." The young boy would often create commentary within his own head just before throwing a pitch. His imagination helped prepare him for those actual games in real life. Practice makes perfect and throwing baseballs against the base concrete wall of his parent's house provided the outlet needed for both his physical and mental talents. The boy's real name was Christian, but everyone called him "Ace." The only time he heard his real name was when he would get in trouble and his mom, Jules would make that emphasis a distinction. He dreamed of game situations and would pretend to be in the moment to build confidence.

Gidget, his loving dog was always with Ace in the back yard as the games would be much amusement for her.

She was perhaps his biggest fan and often got to chase the ball when they got past the little league pitcher. Her barks and howls kept the boy company and she always got treats after his game of imagination.

"First pitch... 'STRIKE!"

Gidget howled! She was his biggest fan. Both boy and dog were always ready for adventure. Next to baseball, that was the boy's biggest love in life. Always there for support and ready to go at a moment's notice.

Ace was mastering pitch control with his unique sidearm delivery. It just felt more natural for Ace to throw in such a manner and it was important to keep the ball low to the base of the house so as not to damage the wooden siding above. His technique and motion provided a crafty curveball slider that often fooled batters. Each pitch built more confidence and Ace was convinced he would become one of the greatest pitchers of all time in the Major Leagues. Baseball was his dream.

Reaction was also key to success. The pitch would bounce quickly from the wall and he would need to capture it before it could get past him. It was all part of his imagination to prepare and practice for actual games. There was also a small opening leading into his parent's carport which needed consideration as well. His mom parked her Cadillac and it was vital Ace not throw the ball too high or he might damage the car.

The ground rules of the games he imagined in the back yard sharpened his reflexes. It was all key to the game of baseball to be prepared for anything unexpected. Every Little League boy understood America's past time from learning the rules and continuing to practice. Pitching was the most important position and the central force of the strategy to begin play. Expectations for the outcome took mental discipline as well as physical ability. Ace compensated for keeping the ball low to batters to minimize the damages. Ground balls are often easy outs and he certainly did not want to put another dent in the siding above the concrete wall because his parents would be angry about his control.

Ace had much faith in his curveball slider. The pitch would curve and break downwards from the batter towards the middle of the plate. He often relied upon the pitch when needed. Practice makes perfect and he was ready to deliver.

He was wearing his own Little League team jersey with the official patch on the sleeve. The gear was as

convincing as one the pros in the show. Ace took a deep breath on his imaginary mound and looked deep within his own mind to see what pitch his concrete catcher would call. The signal was a fastball down the middle. "No!" He thought and shook his head. He wanted to throw another slider. His fastballs were good, but he understood the game more on a psychological level than others. He wanted to fool the invisible batter and put him away before he knew what hit him.

"I'll push my slider just outside the plate to get the batter to chase." Agreement with the call from his concrete catcher set up the next pitch. With a deep breath and the windup in motion, the Little League sensation hurled the pitch home.

It was as if the batter expected the pitch to go outside. The ball became buried in one of his father's pumpkins that grew along with other vegetables along the backside of the house. A field of dreams with growing things was outside the strike zone. The smashing pumpkin took a direct hit. "BALL ONE."

One ball and one strike. Ace shook his own head while watching a vision of the umpire holding up his hands to designate the pitch count. Pressure was mounting. There

was no room for errors in his world of imagination. The building blocks of persistence helped to overcome the challenges faced and everyone who ever stood on the mound knows throwing your best pitch helps the team win.

The philosophy was lost on the pumpkin's persistence as the damage had been done and the orange fruit would soon rot and decay back into the earth's soil. Ace would need to explain the pumpkin's growing potential to his father. The orange goop and pumpkin seeds covered the ball and the boy decided he needed another standard Rawlings official baseball to continue play.

"WOOF! WOOF!" His dog Gidget was often part of the game. She would bark as if part of the crowd. She was helpful at times to chase the balls and track them down for Ace. She had her own potential playing on the defensive side of things in the outfield. The dog was not very handy with a bat. She was not impressed with the wasted pitch and the ball now ruined when it landed inside the pumpkin.

"Calm down, Gidget." Ace ensured her as his dog would get the ball back when the game was over. There was too much on the line at the moment with the critical game situation. Another ball would be needed to determine the brawn of the boy's strength.

Ace wiped the sweat dripping from his Little League cap. His only ambition for the future was to be good enough for potential in the Major Leagues. "Yes, I'm gonna make it to the show," he thought to himself. With enough practice as a child in his parent's back yard, his team was on it's way to the playoffs and he was making the most of his childhood dreams.

He pulled his glove over his face to hide his intense expression staring at the concrete wall of his parent's house. Another wind-up and delivery with his fastball put another dent in the wall. The shattered concrete moulding at the center of the zone bounced back so fast he could not retrieve it in time. His reaction was not quick enough after delivering the pitch. It didn't matter because Ace imagined with so much heat the batter had swung and missed after the ball had found the mark.

"STRIKE TWO!" The umpire called out to the crowd of Oak, Maple and Dogwood trees in the back yard. Nature was an important part of the scenery and often shook their leaves cheered the young boy to victory. The trees and property had been around long before the family moved into the house just a few years ago. New landscaping added embellishments and there was always

more to do around the house in the yard. Much had been added and maintained in the boy's back yard ballpark. Roots had grown deep into the ground with vines running along the fence. Ace imagined the trees, bushes and shrubs were part of the crowd awaiting with anticipated excitement from a boy with big dreams. Foliage and leaves waved to generate a certain magic. Baseball was meant to be a game played in the great outdoors. You could breathe the spirit in the air.

Unfortunately, his fastball returned with such a force it had made it's way past him down the sloped incline through the lower portion of the yard and into his parent's large garden zone. It may take too much time to find at such a moment and so Ace walked over to get another new ball he kept located just along the back driveway. There were only a couple more Rawlings left in reserve and that added more to the pressure of Ace trying to finish out the game.

"WOOF! WOOF!" Gidget now had good reason to urge her owner to put a leash on his imagination. The dog was concerned she wasn't going to have anything to chase if Ace kept losing all his balls. There's never a running clock in the game of baseball, but time was becoming a factor and it would be dinner soon.

"Maybe I can get this guy out with a curve thrown at him that spins inside as he's thinking another junk pitch not to chase." Ace was exercising his mental and performance skills at a young age. He simply needed to prove to himself he could compete amidst all others that had dreams and set himself up for recruitment when the opportunity arose.

The wind-up again and the delivery careened from his sidearm motion which appeared to slide from the batter's stance directly into the strike zone. The batter swung and got just the back end as the ball went bouncing towards the right side ointo the neighbor's yard underneath an abandoned camping trailer now used for storage.

"FOUL BALL!" The umpire declared. The count was still Two Strikes and One Ball. Another wasted pitch. Another unlucky break as it would take too much time and effort to walk over to search underneath the trailer. Besides, the camper had not been used in many years and was now a convenient home to rats. Ace would need to use his last remaining ball. This was it. This one last pitch must determine the end of the game.

"WOOF! WOOF!" Pressure began to mount from Gidget understanding how serious the boy's fantasy impacted realistic expectations. Even a dog separates the men from the boys. Losing more balls was affecting her own game. The competitive nature of sports is giving everything you have for victory. It builds character. Surely the boy could make the pitch count.

The pressure can build to a point where it becomes a game of fate. It's all on the line and there's only one thing to do. Give it your best pitch to end the game.

Ace was thinking differently. I still have a couple of pitches to waste. Maybe the batter will chase another one outside. He winds up and deliberately throws the ball just on the outside edge of the concrete strike zone and the batter was tempted, but held the bat back just in time.

"BALL TWO!" The umpire held up his fingers again with the count two balls and two strikes. Ace quickly retrieved the baseball on it's way back down the hill. He should have thrown it down the pike for a fastball because the batter expected another pitch outside.

"This is it!" Ace thought about his next pitch. The concrete catcher was not much help. Ace must decide for himself what pitch to throw. "I can't waste another pitch as

that would bring the count to three balls and two strikes. If I am not perfect on a full count I will walk in a run and lose the game for the team."

Ace wiped the sweat from his face on his sloped mound and peered into the strike zone. Still uncertain, he shook off the catcher's suggestion. His Mizuno black glove tightened against his face. He got the new signal. That was the pitch he wanted and would determine the outcome.

Ace checked the third base runner to ensure a surprise squeeze play would not be a factor. He released the pitch. Another curving slider from the inside of the plate to the outside and the imaginary batter swung and missed.

"STRIKE THREE! GAME OVER!" The umpire concluded the game. Ace quickly retrieved his last ball for victory. He clutched the ball tight in his baseball glove and jumped as high as he could into the clear blue skies. He had come in relief as he celebrated victory with all his imaginary teammates. Ace threw his black Mizuno pitching glove high into the air in victory. The glove landed on the ground still clutching the ball inside the webbed mitt.

"WOOF! WOOF!" Gidget shared the boy's victorious moment. The dog was excited Ace had not lost the last ball. Both danced around as if a boy and his dog

shared a special bond. It was difficult to determine which was more thrilled as Ace's enthusiasm was equal to the barking.

"Ace, time for Dinner." Shouts from the press box window of his home broke up the celebration. His mother was calling her only son to let him know supper was ready. "Come on in before it gets cold."

With that, Ace continued his victory dance towards the back door while calling for Gidget to follow. "Let's Go, Gidget! It's 'Chewy Time!" Those were the command words to let her know it was time to eat. The dog sniffed around the glove that had been left in the back yard containing the ball.



Chapter Two: Perfect Game

"Big game tomorrow." Frank, the boy's father sat at the dining table waiting for his star son to take a seat. "We've got the Giants." He was alluding to their Little League game as Ace's mother placed plates filled with beef cube steak, gravy and biscuits on the table. "Thank you, dear," the father complimented his wife.

"Hats off at the table, Ace." His mother, Jules was strict on etiquette. She was raising her son to have a proper understanding of making a good impression on others. Jules finally sat down herself and said a quick prayer thankful for the Lord's blessings they each had in life.

"Amen." That was the official signal to eat.

"It's delicious, dear" the father complimented his wife. "Eat up, son" he turned to the boy. "I've got you as the starting pitcher tomorrow and you're gonna need all the energy you can muster against those Giants. They got talent on that team and we'll be fortunate to stop their bats. Our opponent isn't expecting you as a starter, but I think it gives us the best chance to gain momentum early in the game. You've pitched against Smoky before and you know how that boy can knock it out of the park with one swing of the bat. Remember to keep the ball low and outside. A ground ball is a pitcher's best friend."

Frank had mastered baseball strategy and was the team's elected manager having a brief experience in the Major Leagues during Spring Training many years ago. Gifted in most sports, Frank's athletic career came to an end when he decided to get married and settle down with Jules. Becoming a family man offered more realistic goals than a position staying on top of your game in the Major Leagues. The competition at such a high level of athletic ability would be a concern. Another benefit would be to avoid the long seasons in which travel often had an effect and took time away from family. It would be a difficult road for Frank and he never regretted his decision to leave baseball to focus on more selfless rewards. He took pride in his coaching and training those Little League kids. His son

was understanding the finer points of the game and in his early years of development. Frank felt an inner pride as both coach and father.

Ace devoured the cube steak with his hearty appetite. The practice session made him hungry. His imagination could take him farther with preparation than reality had to offer. The food was delicious and nobody could compete with his mom's cooking. She was in a league of her own. Family coexistence had been a blessing to Ace and his parents. Those home cooked meals are far better because she seasoned everything with love and spread common sense on the daily bread.

"Chew your food slowly" Jules warned, "and keep your mouth closed while eating." Her overbearing discipline was nothing more than teaching good manners. "Try the biscuits and gravy," she suggested.

"Awe, mom!" Ace defended his position. "You know I only eat one thing at a time." It was true that even as a young child he compartmentalized his food in some sequential order based on what he preferred most. Frank burst in laughter.

"I wish I could be a kid again." His father reflected back to the time he was his son's age. "You don't know how good you have it. Back when I was young we had to walk up the hill both ways to and from the ballpark. You get to ride to the game in style." There was a point to be made between the generation gap as Frank grew up during a time when most families struggled for existence. Baby boomers provided a pathway for future generations having gone through the sacrifices made by their own parents. Frank often spoke about baseball through the lens of history and much of it was reflective of the truth.

Ace chewed more slowly and mixed his beef cube steak with the biscuits and gravy. His parents turned the conversation to more important adult matters. Ace knew he had much to learn in life as his parents allowed him to practice pitching against the concrete wall. The boy's strength came from his parents support mixed with his own imagination. As an only child, he received full attention without having to compete with other siblings. That may have had something to do with his active mindset in which he believed he was truly special. Life was good and he had no reason to complain.

They finished up the meal with just a small portion of the ground steak left. Jules took up the plates to hand wash in the sink before all could retire to bed for the evening. She was the backbone of the family structure taking care of most of the needed chores in the home, providing a more convenient life for others. That gave her an inner sense of satisfaction. Jules was Super-Mom in her son's eyes as she was the manager of the family with cooking, cleaning, and all the financial obligations needed. Frank may have been the manager on the Little League field of play, but Ace's mom was Major League when it came to family necessities.

"Here, son" she turned to Ace. "Give these leftovers to Gidget when you feed her." With that they all looked around for their hairy companion. Gidget was disciplined and knew not to interfere at the dinner table. Typically she would usually lay within range expecting a few scraps after the people had eaten. It seemed odd she was not nearby.

"Where is your dog?" Frank asked. "Have you fed her yet?" It was the boy's responsibility to feed Gidget. Ace was perplexed as well realized he had not fed her yet.

"She has a bowl downstairs from before, so let me go see if she needs more to eat." Ace assured his parents his pet would not go hungry. "I'm sure she will love the chopped steak as much as I did." It was unusual she wasn't nearby waiting for scraps. Ace had been tested by his parents on occasion about his lack of responsibility. The lectures were beginning to sound like a broken record. He looked for excuses at times knowing he needed to focus on those expectations. He had been rushed into the house when his mother called for dinner. He could not recall Gidget following him into the back door from the lower level of the house. He checked every room downstairs to find her. Gidget was nowhere in sight.

"There you are!" Ace felt relieved as he noticed her reflective eyes peering into his parent's home just outside the sliding glass door. "Good Girl! Come on in." Ace opened the door to let her inside. "I've got some goodies for you." It was then he remembered the exciting workout in the yard. Gidget must not have followed him through the door. Rather than listen to another lecture about being responsible, Ace played through the scene as if she was in the house the entire time. He was not going to admit anything to his parents and what they don't know wouldn't set up a late night scuffle.

Gidget raced up the stairs sniffing the floor for anything that may have fallen to the ground. It was obvious

she was hungry and looking to be fed. Ace quickly went to pull out her dog food and added the extra beef.

"So she *hasn't* been fed." The boy's father charged as he noticed Gidget chomping feverishly at the bowl. Frank had an instinct and simply put the statement for Ace to consider. It was too late in the evening for another lecture

"Perhaps Gidget is sick" Jules intervened. She knew Frank would take any opportunity to teach the boy another lesson. It was just parenting, but he could use more ammunition than necessary. "She has acted skittish of late and it would do us good to take her to the vet."

"I dunno," Ace complied knowing his mother was suggesting alternative motives for the dog's behavior. In truth, the boy knew she had protective maternal instincts as well as disciplinary measures and there would be nothing to be gained through argument as neither of them knew the truth.

"We were outside for quite some time. She may have just been tired from chasing the balls." That was Ace's response to cover all the bases. He had not noticed anything unhealthy with his pet. Gidget had wiped the stainless steel dog bowl clean when Ace called to her. "Come on girl, let's go to bed."

"Yes, it's time for bed" his mother agreed.

"Remember what your father said. Big game tomorrow, so don't stay up listening to music on your headphones too late because you will need a good night's sleep to beat them Giants."

Ace coaxed Gidget into his bedroom. The two lay together at the edge of the to bed to rest after such a memorable day. Both sighed simultaneously. The boy and his dog were two peas in a pod and the most perfect union of unconditional love. Gidget followed him everywhere he went and engaged in every activity. She was a constant companion to an only child. It filled the void and provided an inspiring alternative to loneliness.

Gidget turned over on her backside as if to encourage another belly rub. Ace understood it was a form of contentment as most dogs lay on their back when feeling a sense of satisfaction. Gidget trusted Ace and was the closest thing to a true friend. There were not many kids living in their neighborhood that were similar in age and it was often a struggle to make friends.

"You're not sick." Ace told her. "It was my fault for leaving you outside." The boy knew he needed to improve becoming more responsible and apologized to his loving pet. Gidget yawned and then added a deep sigh. She turned over and curled into herself ready to sleep.

The boy reached for his headphones while placing his head on the pillow. The song on the playlist was a melody emphasizing 'Tomorrow.' The message had a deeper meaning, but the instruments carried the tune of optimism. As if it were a soundtrack to life, the music began to fade as Ace began a series of fantastic dreams about pitching in the Major Leagues. He envisioned leading his team to victory. Dreams gave hope through his creative imagination of victorious achievements. His parents would become so proud of him someday. Perhaps that would be Tomorrow.

Tomorrow and many more tomorrows. His dreamscape provided comfort. Confidence that each new day would be an awakening to more glorious victory in his future. The boy and dog lay comfortably on the bed as the sandman provided a cloak of deeper sleep. The boy's dreams of imagination could become a reality, but for the moment he was fast asleep until "Tomorrow."



Chapter Three: Foul Play

"Are you ready for it!" Frank turned on the overhead light in his son's room to bring him out of the boy's dreamscape. His father was always up before the dawn and ready to face new challenges for a new day. Ace pulled the bed sheet and blanket over his face to protect the blinding light shining from his bedroom ceiling like a shining beacon.

"Up and at em, my boy" his father continued.

"We've got the first game, so let's get an early start. If we win, we're in the final series."

Ace was not an early bird. A rising star in the morning took time and his sleep habit needed a few more minutes to transition from a good night's sleep before he would be ready to face the challenges of a new day. The light in his room was far much brighter than nature's dawn.

The sun was breaking through the dark forest woods covering the eastern horizon. The morning was still asleep and still covered with a blanket of darkness. Just a little more time was all Ace needed.

"Get up from bed and take Gidget out. You know the drill." That was another item on the boy's growing list of responsibilities. She was his dog and that would be the first priority to allow his dog to relieve herself. Frank was teaching his son those simple lessons of life's daily grind. It helped build character and confidence going through the motions. It generates healthy habits to build a routine to follow on a consistent basis. Ace threw the bed covers aside and raised his head enough to swing around to land on his feet. If nothing else could be accomplished, he at least made his way out of bed.

Gidget took a giant leap for dogkind knowing the well-trained routine. She lived in the moment as most dogs never seem stressed or worried about the future. Her tail wagged excitedly as Ace pulled on his morning trousers. He rounded up his socks and shoes and threw on a new shirt. All his clothes contained a sports theme. He rarely wore anything else. If there wasn't a team logo or

something that resembled a jersey, it was not part of his wardrobe. He didn't have as much energy as his loving canine jumping excitedly to face the new day. He finally pushed himself through the home down the steps and into the back yard. Gidget was waiting for him at the door.

"Come on, girl. Let's go!" Ace grabbed a pepperoni treat from the cabinet opening the sliding glass door to let Gidget outside. There was no need for a leash and collar. She had been well trained for taking care of business and quickly returned for her treat.

It was taking longer than usual and Ace noticed his dog hovering over the mound area in his backyard. After a few calls to encourage her to return, Gidget continued to sniff around the yard suspiciously. Her nose pressed against some debris in the yard. Ace walked to where his dog was sniffing.

"MY GLOVE!" Ace shouted in horror. His black Mizuno baseball glove had been shred to pieces along his mound area. The victorious moment the day before turned to disaster. How would he be able to explain the condition of his glove to his parents?

"You chewed up my glove!" He scolded his pet in frustration. His one and only unconditional loving

companion had torn through his baseball glove and chewed through leather. The effects began tore through the boy's heart and soul. To wake up on such a big game day and discover such a tragic circumstance was overwhelming. Ace wasn't sure what to do. He should've just stayed in bed.

"BAD DOG! BAD DOG!" Ace yelled at her. Gidget pressed her tail underneath and slowly wandered towards the back door. She understood the tone of Ace's voice. She was not given her treat that particular morning.

What was to be done? Ace did not have his glove for the big game. It would only be a matter of time before he could explain to his parents that his dog had chewed his glove. The early game start would begin before there would be a chance for his parents to buy him a new glove and those questions began to run through his mind how to resolve the issue.

Ace followed his moping companion to the back sliding glass door. "Get inside!" He commanded as his frustration pulled the sliding door bar with force. He used too much force out of frustration and rammed the door against the other side in which the door became locked in place. It was stuck and Ace could not unjam the glass door

without doing more damage. Problems continued to escalate. He tried pulling the door from the inside and knocked over his parent's most treasured decorative vase against the wall. It shattered into pieces. It was damaged and broken along with his glove and that would be something else to explain. The day had started off with tragic circumstances. His father was going to start him pitching in the game against the Giants, but now Ace did not have a baseball glove.

Stomping up the stairs, Ace went back to his bedroom to collect his remaining baseball gear. His jersey, cap and other equipment was in his drawer below. His father was already dressed for the game and going over his strategy. There wasn't much time to explain, but the boy needed to think through his pitch to his father about the baseball glove. Other issues would come later.

Going through the motions changing into his team uniform may be more reflective of team spirit. Explaining the circumstances to his father would not be easy. The jersey may not make much of a difference if he would not have a glove for the big game. His imagination could not bring him a solution in the real world. He would need to make a confession and hope for the best conclusion.

"Dad," he began softly. "Gidget chewed up my baseball glove." The silence was more terrifying than his father shouting or lecturing him about responsibility. Time stood still for what seemed an eternity. Guilt found an abstract emptiness while the boy waited for a reaction.

"How did this happen?" His father finally broke the silence waiting for a more clear explanation. There was more to the story not yet revealed. The look of disappointment became the surface pattern on his father's face. Parenthood can wear a thin disguise when faced with unexpected moments. Frank's coaching uniform tightened around his waist as he waited for answers.

"I dunno," was all the boy could tell him. "I guess she just wanted the ball I left inside the pocket and tore through the glove to get to it." It was the only excuse Ace could come up with on such short notice.

Frank's head bowed down as if it were he that had failed. Raising a son that doesn't understand responsibility was a frustration. The boy's father seemed to know the answers before he asked.

"Where did you leave the glove?"

Ace avoided the direct line of questioning. That would lead to another lecture about responsibility.

"Where did you leave the glove?" His father repeated demanding an explanation and waiting for an answer. Frank began to put the previous evening's events together remembering the dog had not been fed until late and was missing throughout dinner. There was something his son was not telling him about the truth. That seemed more disappointing than the shredded glove.

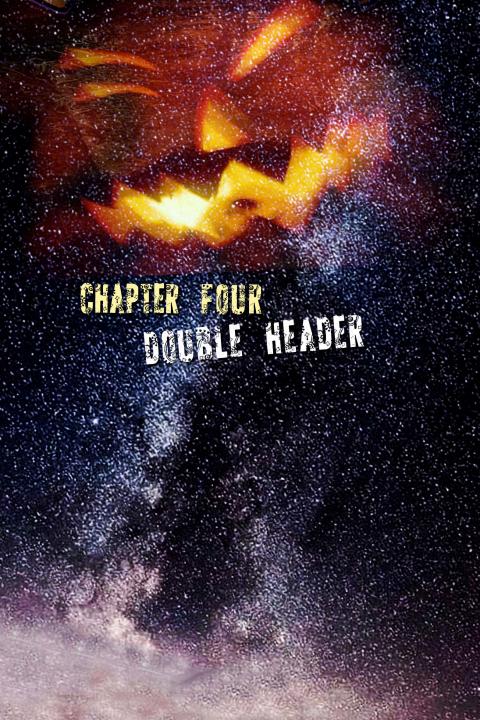
"I left it outside when mom called us in for dinner."
That was the boy's diversionary tactic to place blame on his mother. It was a long shot and not a viable defense, but it was the only thing he could think to say during the confrontation.

"We'll discuss this later." His father looked at the clock on their kitchen wall. "We need to get to the park. Big game today so let's waste no time getting there." That was all he said, but Ace knew there would be more time later with further discussion about his lack of responsibility.

His parents Cadillac El Dorado was a luxurious ride to the ballpark, yet provided no comfort for Ace. Much was weighing in his mind that his baseball glove had been shredded by his own dog and his father was angry with him. He had not even told them about the broken vase. He would worry about that later.

The engine of the car was silent as the unspoken conversation. Not a word uttered while Ace sat in the back seat. His father was at the wheel driving while his mother rode shotgun in the front passenger seat. The trip seemed much longer when silent. Most rides to the game were filled with continuous chatter and excitement. The dynamics had shifted gears and was not firing on all cylinders.

Much was going through Frank's mind reconsidering the strategy of the game. His son's lack of responsibility made him uneasy about the boy's confidence. Disappointment changed his plan to start him against the Giants. They were the best team in the Little League system and his son's mind was filled with doubt. All that talent and practice may not have been enough to overcome realistic expectations. The psychological mood had shifted and Ace wasn't ready to give his full effort. He had other concerns and may not be prepared to focus on the game in key situations. Besides, he did not have a glove. Sure, there may be others around to use, but Frank felt a need to teach his son a valuable lesson.



Chapter Four: Double Play

The Dugout can be a lonely place while watching your teammates perform knowing you should be on the mound pitching a perfect game. Ace did not have a glove and his father was the manager of the team. Some other kid was given the starting pitching position. Nobody knew his real name. Everyone just called him "The Dude."

The Dude had long hair and his parents were from the hippie generation in which freedom was just another word for nothing left to lose. The boy did have skills and he knew how to throw a knuckleball. Nobody could hit that pitch. The two boys were about as different as sunshine to stormy weather. Ace would never be allowed to grow his hair as long The Dude sported. His parents were different by all accounts. Ace held a clean cut presentation as his

own parents were more disciplined. The Dude did know how to throw a knuckleball.

"Let's Go, Dude!" Frank encouraged his new starting pitcher. "Three up and Three Down! Give 'em the junk and come back at them with the heat!" As coach and manager, Frank was a well-trained motivator and knew the score in all the kids hearts as much as the points on the board. Ace lived in the shadow of his father with all the mentoring. He often had a glimpse receiving much needed attention from other players on the team. It was never enough in his own eyes and that may have been the reason for his imagination taking control of the vision he had for himself in a realistic world he could only deal with through fantasy.

Ace took note of his father cheering for the Dude. Surreal that he had been replaced and now his father favored such an unorthodox kid. Ace felt he should be pitching. He felt an unfairness as none of the other players lived with his father and their flaws were not so evident. Living with his managing father, he could not escape certain distractions and often felt a personal resentment. The Dude was a cool guy and there were no animosities between the two of them, but he was pitching and Ace was on the bench without a glove. Distinctive differences

between the two family structures seemed irrelevant on the field of play. Ace just did not understand why he was not pitching. Was it because of the glove his dog had shredded into so many pieces? Life did not seem fair while he watched from the bench in the dugout.

The Dude gave up three runs in the first inning. Not exactly the start the the team hoped for as they struggled to get outs on defense and their offense was not much of a threat. Things were getting out of hand and only a miracle would get them back in the game.

"Thought you were pitching today," one of the kids finally approached Ace. His name was Jack. Nobody knew much about Jack. His family was never around. Most thought of him as a loner, but that was as far as anyone cared to know. He was new to the team showing up later in the season.

"I don't have a glove. My dog chewed it up last night." It sounded silly to admit, but that was the truth. Jack looked at him as if he knew something about his circumstance. Losing something important was in both their eyes and there was a moment that became suspended animation between the two. Jack looked at Ace and finally winked at him. Ace had a gut instinct Jack knew more

about others than they knew anything about him. He had an underlying confidence and yet so distant.

"We're getting crushed out there." Jack related "It may take a miracle to come back in a game like this." He wasn't the sort to put too much stock in unrealistic expectations. He knew the score. They were down two runs in the final innings. Jack was on deck and turned to Ace, "I'm on deck to bat. You can borrow my glove because I need to leave. It's that black Mizuno at the end of the bench, same as yours!"

"Gee, Thanks! Get a hit and maybe we can score a few more runs." Ace felt a sudden optimism. Odd the two had the same glove as he offered it for him to play. Where was Jack going? He said he needed to leave. Jack tipped his hat for good luck. There was something very respectful between the two boys. Ace had faith Jack would get a hit.

"Six more outs to catch up on two runs and then we need to stop them on defense." Ace knew the score and game situation. His father as manager of the team had given the boy much insight about the game of baseball. Successful strategy doesn't replace fundamental judgement and action on the field of play. Motivation, cheers and good

coaching helped pursuits to winning. It would take a team effort to score more runs and catch up in the game.

A walk was just the thing to have the entire dugout roaring and shouting intimidation. The Giants were considered to have the most talent in the league. It would not be easy to come back from a two-run deficit. The team needed all the cheers they could get while the crowd came to life. Kids having fun during the excitement of the game was often more important than winning or losing. They all played to win while it's the experience of trial and effort that gives young kids an escape from so many other aspects of life.

"Batter, Batter, Batter...Swing!" The Giants discouraged Jack stepping up to the plate to lose focus. First pitch curved outside. Jack swung and missed. One strike and no balls. The Giants bench turned to laughter. Comedy was back in their opponents dugout. Jack stared into the Giants dugout. An eerie grin embellished his face. He then looked up towards the blue sky Heavens and turned back around to give the Giants a wink. He then turned to the catcher behind the plate and said, "Tell your pitcher to throw that pumpkin again and I will smash it to smithereens beyond the edge of the universe."

"Batter, Batter, Batter...SWING!" More intimidation from the Giants bench.

"Let's go, Jack. Get a hit!" Calls from the dugout indicated a favorable pitch for Jack and so he swung with all his might making contact driving the ball straight through the middle. The shortstop quickly caught up to the ball, stepped on second and threw the ball to first. Double Play! Two outs.

Jack tripped over first base and fell to the ground. He wasn't moving. His injury became a concern for all those in attendance. Unconscious and non-responsive to those trying to help made clear that he could not continue playing in the game. An ambulance showed soon afterwards while placing Jack on the stretcher.

"Give Ace my glove." Those were the last words heard just before the lonely kid was taken away. All felt sorry for Jack. His parents were not at the game. It was clear the boy could no longer play and Ace needed a glove. A strange last request from the lonely kid gave the team a boost. It may have just been the motivation the team needed as Jack was taken away in the ambulance.

"Let's go out and win this one for Jack!" Frank encouraged the team. Ace had Jack's glove. It was the same kind of glove he had at home his dog had chewed. There was no time to consider the coincidence. The game was on the line and they rallied around the effort knowing it was the last request from a fallen teammate. Their manager knew the score providing all the motivation he could to encourage the team.

Another strikeout led to the bottom half of the fifth inning. The teams exchanged positions on the field. A last defensive effort to stop the Giants from scoring more runs would give the team a more likely chance to score in their last half of the last inning.

Cheers from the crowd for both teams roared through the Little League park. Excitement reached a climax through the magic forces of youth ambition. Frank felt it was time to bring in his Ace. 'The Dude's' pitches were getting soft and the manager wanted a fresh arm in the bottom half to hold the Giants lead. Frank had Ace replace Jack after the injury and moved a few players in new positions.

Ace was given the ball by his father and told to take the mound. This was every kid's dream and perhaps one of the reasons he practiced so much throwing the ball against his parent's house. He felt a new optimism and confidence. Ace was ready to prove himself. He wanted to make an impression on his dad. Three outs and they would win the game.

Ace was on fire striking out the first two batters. His slider was giving the Giants a challenge. It was breaking inside all the way outside and they couldn't get their bats to connect with the ball. Two outs and only one more to go. Ace looked to see who he would face next. It was Smoky. The best batter in the league. Ace would need to keep the ball away from him or Smoky would knock it out of the park.

Smoky got his nickname because he smoked every pitcher in the league. He was the Giants best hitter and arguable the best in the league. Always a home run threat and one bad pitch or mistake would become detrimental. Ace suddenly felt butterflies hovering around weakening his legs.

"You've got this, son." His father told him as if that had some new message. "Now be the Ace we need and let's win this! Three up and Three Down! Let's go team! Be alert!"

Ace paced around the mound for a moment and looked into the small window where his catcher was giving

him the signal for the pitch. Slider inside as Ace stared into the location.

"Strike One!" was the call.

"OK. That was good." He felt really comfortable with his pitches and now the catcher wanted a slider to the outside. Ace made the adjustment with his sidearm motion as the ball broke inside to outside and Smoky swung again.

"Strike Two!" The umpire held up his fingers to show the pitch count. No balls and two strikes. Ace began to lose a sense of himself on the mound. His vision began to blur. His mind was on other things as if suddenly overwhelmed. He stepped off the mound and paced around for a moment. He lost focus. Perhaps it was the glove his dog had chewed. Maybe it was the broken vase. He would need to answer to his parents after the game about the many things that suddenly began to swirl through his mind. Who was Jack? It was as if he already knew he would be leaving the game. That is why the boy had given him the glove. Questions began to swirl throughout. Ace felt a dizziness.

His father called for a consultation on the mound. He may have noticed something was wrong. The catcher came out as well. "I'm thinking fastball right down the middle of the plate." It was a risky pitch to throw. "Smoky isn't expecting the pitch and may lay off it thinking you're gonna make him chase a couple outside."

Ace got back on the mound and finally regained his focus and blurred vision. He stared into the catcher's mitt. He then looked at Smoky. The crowd was going crazy with excitement.

Ace went into his windup and let the ball fly. A fastball straight through the middle of the Strike Zone. The pitched was away and now in suspended animation. Ace fell unconscious on the pitching mound.



Chapter Five: The Dark Forest

Ace found himself back in his room at home not realizing how he got there. He was still deep in his mysterious world of imagination and knew nothing about the game results. Life seemed unfair and confusing as he could not understand the difference between the real world and fantasy. Too many circumstances and expectations beyond his control. Gidget was laying next to him as she rolled over for a belly rub. That brought Ace back to reality.

"Nobody's Perfect." He convinced himself that he wasn't the only one with problems stretching his arm over the bed to scratch the fur on Gidget's belly. "You know this is all You're fault! You chewed up my baseball glove and ruined my day."

"Doesn't matter. I still love you." Ace considered his pet a true companion and more of a friend than an animal. The boy didn't quite understand why his parents were so strict and disciplined with him. "Why don't my parents love me the same as I love you?" The question continued to swirl through his mind with recent events. It just didn't make sense. "Everybody makes mistakes. We live and learn, but being grounded for two weeks seems extreme." It did seem extreme as he did not feel at fault. Gidget created all the damage, so why was Ace made to suffer?

His arm grew tired as he laid with his head dangling off the edge of the bed. Gidget turned over and spread out next to the boy in similar fashion as if to mimic the posture. Blood began to rush into Ace's head while thinking through the problems of how to overcome the obstacles in his life.

The boy continued to reflect upon the day's events. Despite the negative consequences, he had performed well in the game, although he could not remember how the game ended. He needed assurance more than discipline. Things were swirling in his head from just one day. Perhaps his mind became overloaded and he blacked out from being overwhelmed.

There was a sense of frustration and a drained spirit within. He continued to explore his problems knowing deep inside it really was his fault leaving the glove. He had been lectured about his irresponsibility too many times. He was trying his best to gain trust and become better and yet could do nothing right in the eyes of his mother and father. They had become too overbearing and needed to loosen their demands. After all, Ace was still just a young boy.

"Everybody has problems." He thought. His mind became filled with nebulous activity racing through darkness. He then remembered the Dark Forest just beyond his home. "Magic! A Miracle!" That's what dad said at the game. There must be more to that. The word continued to penetrate his thoughts.

Baseball and life had certain similarities. Each was a reflection of the other. Game situation and life circumstances require actions taken through performance to resolve issues. Ace was young at heart, but already had a strong-willed mental disposition. He somehow understood the underlying meaning of America's pastime. It was often a mystery how the two were somehow intertwined. It's unpredictable throughout either the game of life and baseball.

"Magic! A Miracle!" There were those words again swirling through the cloud space in his mind. Ace could not get it out of his head. Those words cast an enchanted spell with some energetic force within his soul. He was restless. Perhaps it was the blood rushing through the membranes or a neurological deficiency as if sparks of fairy dust began forming new thoughts and ideas. It may have been a combination of numerous elements working collectively to focus on problem resolutions.

"Let's go, Girl!" He called out to Gidget. His dog perked up wagging her tail suspecting some new adventure based on his tone of voice. Ace was restless and needed to clear his mind with the outside air. He was not about to remain grounded in his stuffy room. Gidget needed the exercise as well as she likes to go outdoors to escape as well.

Ace put on his camouflage shorts and Braves jersey. He tied the strings around his hiking shoes and opened up the window in his bedroom. He then lowered Gidget down through the window and climbed through himself. He wasn't going to take too long and his parents were already in bed asleep. Stars were out and not a cloud in the night sky. Chances are Ace and Gidget would not be missed.

"I know it's late." Ace assured his dog. "I can't be cooped up in my room for two weeks. We both need to explore. You need this as much as I do!" The boy grabbed her pet and collar just in case and the two crept along the path that led into the woods beyond their home. The stars provided just enough visibility to make their way through the woods and into the Dark Forest. An adventure to some unknown destination would be just the cure for a boy and his dog. Nothing was making sense other than a simple act of rebellious nature.

Gidget took the lead sniffing the trail leading into deeper woods. On occasion, he would stop and push her nose against the wind to pick up a new scent. Both their senses heightened in the darkness of the evening. Rodents and other creatures scurried along the earth's cracked surface. Silhouettes amplified with a vision of blurred foliage and other vague shapes along the path. Trees in the forest led them into a long forgotten world where only memories existed.

A screech owl lifted it's wings and flew in passing from above within the Dark Forest. Nature's ominous forces were at work while the two made their way. Ace wasn't expecting to travel this far into the woods, but the Dark Forest cast it's own spell on strangers. It was as if the boy had been hypnotized with curiosity on a journey with some purpose. He and Gidget would need to turn back soon before they reached forever.

Gidget barked. There was a light in the distance. It appeared to be a flame. "Is that a fire?" Ace wanted to investigate. His dog barked again as if in warning. They had delved deep into the Dark Forest. It seemed strange there was a fire in the distance.

"It's not that far. Come on, Gidget and let's see where the light comes from in this Dark Forest." The night had now fallen pitch black in the deep woods. Trees had thickened blocking the light from the stars. No creatures stirred and there was an eerie quietness. Only the sound of their own footsteps left a trace of existence. Shuffling their way along the trail towards the light, Ace was drawn into searching for some element he did not quite understand. Indeed there was a fire as they closed the distance through the Dark Forest.

"What was that?" Ace wondered. There was something running just to one side. A large creature of some kind, but not certain what it was. Fear began to enter both the boy and his dog. Whatever it was sounded large

enough to do harm. Gidget squatted and peed upon the trail. It wasn't clear to Ace whether it was her fear or to mark a location along the trail to make their way back or warn others. Dogs and animals have instincts humans may never understand

Frogs and toads suddenly began to croak along the way. "We must be near the swamp area." Ace had never been this deep into the Dark Forest. Recent heavy rains had filled depressed areas and extended the murky swamp. The two could encroach in only one direction. It felt like a trap to ensnare their ability to escape. The fire in the heart of darkness pulled them in like a moth to a flame. Fear continued to penetrate their neurological brainwaves.

The two closed in on the source of flames shooting out from a large cauldron just ahead. The light sparkled with brilliance and Ace was certain he could see fantastic images dancing in the fire. It was a contrast of warm colors against the black veil of the night. Sparks similar to fireworks on a small scale beckoned curious minds and drew them into it's majestic quality.

Gidget peed again and began to whimper. There was something unnatural about this mysterious place at the edge of the swamp and deep within the woods. More

creatures of the night stirred. They were being watched by nocturnal eyes in the Dark Forest. It was too late to turn back. The fire should provide answers to questions and that may have been what the boy had been looking for all along. Closer and closer he was drawn to the light by some force within. A burning ambition and hidden desire for discovery. Something wicked was in the air and it was too late to turn back. Ace had to face his horror.



Chapter Six: Olga, the Witch

Ace could hear a voice and perked his ear against the long line of old forest trees covering the starry night. A futile attempt to shine down from the Heavens above. Just beyond he could make out the words of an old witch hag. Gidget followed from behind instead of taking the lead. The dog sensed danger ahead.

A nervous sensation with every step forward losing his balance more than once. His legs weakened with every step towards the light. He could not help but to continue despite the urge to turn and run away. There was something calling him beyond what he could understand. It was a driving force towards in the dark zone of reality.

"Double Trouble, Boil and Bubble...Light the Fire amidst the...Cauldron?"

The words seemed mysterious and clear enough to Ace, but there was uncertainty in the tone. Doubt in the expression revealed the true horror. The fire from the cauldron revealed the source of light within the Dark Forest. Cast iron flames leapt from the burning liquid inside. His vision sharpened with the flames that drew him closer.

"The mist at Night will find delight...The only thing to SEE...the Light?" The witch fumbled with her words.

Ace's vision returned in full focus. He could see with more clarity. The witch was attempting her dark magic. Surreal as if in a dream, but there she was behind the cauldron and the light of the flames. Was she aware he was watching? Ace stumbled over a large vine upon the ground. He was certain it reached up to pull his weight to an awkward position. With that, Ace had made his presence known to the witch.

"Curiosity killed the cat. Easy, boy. I'm not quite sure how that works with dogs, but if I were in your position, I wouldn't risk enchanted potions at night." The voice now appeared guttural and convincing. "I am Olga of the Gray witch covenant." The aged woman lifted the brim of her hat so the two could see her features by the light of the cauldron's flame. Her torn black gown was decorated with spider webs, feathers, and what appeared to be blood. No doubt she was an authentic witch.

She appeared long overdue for death and perhaps witchcraft was the only thing that kept those ancient wrinkles clinging to her crusty face. The reflective orange gleam from the flames was a brilliant contrast to her emerald green eyes. Despite the complete lack of beauty there was an attractive element to the old witch.

"So, what brings you to my humble abode?" She asked the boy.

"Abode?" Ace wasn't quite familiar with the meaning of the word. Most of his diction was based on the language of baseball and other dialect driven from sports. He was more than average when it came to creative writing and the arts, but was not familiar with the word.

"Abode." The witch reiterated with more clarity and sarcasm as if it were really her own insecurities that were more at risk than the boy's misunderstanding.

"Residence...Dwelling...Home! You have a home, don't

you, boy?"

"Well, yes." Ace owned up to the truth. "I live with my parents." Gidget still cowered with her nose to the ground. The boy's dog anticipated something about to go horribly wrong. Animal instincts indicated an inner sense of tragic circumstances.

"So what's ye trouble?" The witch wanted to know. It was the boy that was trespassing upon her abode, residence, dwelling...home."

"Trouble?" Ace wasn't quite clear about where the witch was leading him in their brief conversation. He wasn't sure why he was there in the Dark Forest deep within the woods. There was some mysterious element why he and his dog had escaped from his parent's home. At this point it became obvious he had been drawn there beyond his will to understand.

"Yes, boy. You came to me!" The witch ranted growing impatient with questions. "Don't waste my time. I'm old and have no time for those too young to understand basic principles of life. What's on yer mind?"

Ace took a moment to think about what had been bothering him. The nebulous cloud shifted shapes within his own imaginative mind and broke clear to the one thought that worried him most of all. His parents. The

unjust treatment and judgement from the destruction of his baseball glove became prominent within the focus of his mind. His parents seemed more interested in punishing him for random circumstances than putting him in a position to succeed. They were the one's not understanding his willpower.

"My parents are cruel to me." He blurted out with the voice leaving his throat before he knew what he was saying. "They punish me for things beyond my control." Another deceptive excuse to avoid his lack of responsibility. "I guess they're trying their best to help raise me for my own actions, but I wasn't the one that chewed up my baseball glove!" Gidget put her tail between her own legs and covered her eyes with her paws. Both may have been partners in crime, but a pet cannot differentiate right and wrong. All Gidget wanted was to play as well as her owner. It was never her intention to place him in a circumstance of fault through her own behavior.

"Trouble with the elders, eh!" The witch proposed.

"I've got a spell for that." An owl suddenly fluttered nearby with wings spread wide landing on her right shoulder.

"Now where's me book of recipes?"

The witch looked around her humble abode as the cast iron cauldron continued to flare spirits from the flames unexpectedly. The owl flew from her shoulders landing on a nearby tree stump next to a large thick book. "Ah! Here it 'tis."

The voluminous book was so heavy it took all her strength to carry for just a short distance. The witch began to filter through the pages looking to find a spell to cast. Her eyes rested on a page and began to read through the directions. Her eyes widened with interest for potions to change and alter human composition. An enchantment exploiting through possible solutions would be the cure for the boy's parents situation.

"Hmmm..." The witch considered the possibilities. "No ravens near here, but a large crow may suffice." She turned her head slowly to look up into a nearby tree. The owl waited with it's eyes wide open as if it knew there was something to be hunted.

"Felder, I needs a large crow!" The witch shouted directly to the owl. "Go fetch me one NOW!" The great white owl fluffed it's wings and took off into the darkness. "That's Felder, my owl." Olga's pet companion could be heard in the distance within the Dark Forest. "He fetches

me things I need for spells and charms. Nature has it's own blessings and why I enjoy living a solitary life. I feel more protected deep within this Dark Forest than living within your world. We often call that an ironic twist. Do you know the meaning of those words, boy? It's just as scary for you here as it is for me living there."

"So, you are a true witch." Ace politely asked the aging woman. Time stood still while the witch's face kept eternal years of memories under her layered wrinkles. Ace had no idea how long either of them had been in the Dark Forest. He could only imagine her actual age.

"A witch. True." Olga confirmed.

"Then you must know magic?" Ace continued to question her. The boy's struggle between reason and doubt fed his couriosity within his mind of clouded vision. There was something more to life than his own imagination. Circumstances where reactions take province with solutions. There had to be more to discover within the inner soul and those things which could not be explained nor realized in reality appeared to reveal the truth. Miracles and Magic seemed possible in this world of enchantment. Some force of will created by potion recipes was unrealistic in the

land of the living. Ace had doubts within his own mind where he was being led by his imagination.

"Magic?" The witch was now the one questioning the words. "Magic is often the art of deception. No, dearie, my gift is deep-rooted in nature. As strong as oak and powerful as the vines that guided you along the path that led you here."

"None of this seems natural," Ace put up in defense. He had felt drawn into the woods and was more than certain there was some mystical power beckoning his path in life. Yet, he had walked into the Dark Forrest on his own free will.

"Nonsense!" The witch argued. "You are not so much in search of anything any more than you are trying to *escape* your own sense of self." She gave the boy a standard guard witch glare to reveal the truth. "Perhaps *you* are the problem!"

Ace looked down upon the ground to locate Gidget. By this point his dog had moved away some distance laying on a patch of leaves watching every move the witch made. Ace did not feel he was the problem as Gidget was the one who destroyed his baseball glove. The incident ruined the day's events as a result. Neither the boy nor his dog would

be so deep within the Dark Forest had the event turned otherwise

As if the witch could read his mind, she knew more to the story than the boy revealed. The owl returned and dropped a large crow on a table set to the side of the large black cauldron. Sparks leapt with a new spirit and Ace thought he could see his parents form a vision from within the flames.

"Perhaps." Olga could read the boy's mind. "Yer parents don't understand the boy they raisin. Seems clear. I think I can help you with a spell I know. It's the Parent Curse. It should help both to know what it's like living in the other's shoes, so to speak." It sounded suspicious, but the witch needed approval to continue.

"It's not a charm, but a spell I will cast that will give you dominion and control over your parent's decisions and judgements. Stubborn parents twist and turn your life into misery. Trust me, I know. Witchcraft was my means to escape myself. I believe we met here tonight as a challenge for us both. I did not bring you here as you came on your own will. You are looking to discover answers for yourself. Therefore, we can help each other. These mystic forces in nature often lead to new discoveries. Nature has the power

to change the soul. This is an opportunity for you to learn more than you can imagine in that creative mind of yours."

Ace was already spellbound by how much the witch could sense only knowing him for such a short time. Her many years of existence as an elderly witch appeared like magic. It was that will and sense of truth that led the boy and his dog to her.

"You must request the spell I will cast." The witch insisted. For her to continue, the boy must make it official. "Say it, boy. Ask me to cast 'The Parent Curse' for it is you that will be given reign to have more control over your parent's guardianship."

Gidget suddenly barked fiercely in warning. The dog may not have understood the words, but knew the tone of voice was manipulating a promise of misunderstandings between the forces of darkness and light. It was, after all black magic, sorcery, and witchcraft that appeared before them. Gidget barked again.

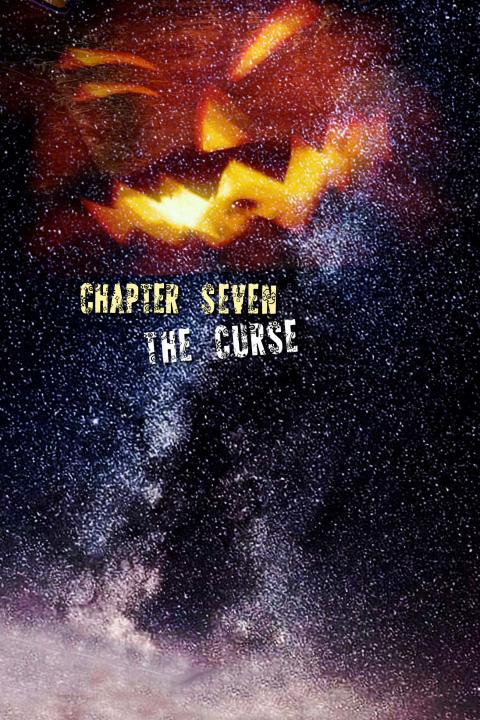
"WOOF! WOOF!"

Gidget was trying to get her master's attention. She knew this was not a good idea. The dog wanted to interrupt the procession. Ace was confused. He wasn't one to consider so much information at once and had to make a

decision. The nebulous clouds in his mind broke free. He wanted nothing more than to agree to terms giving him control over his parent's. He wished nothing more than that.

"Olga, I ask you to cast the spell for 'The Parent Curse' as agreed to terms." That made it official. Olga reached over with a long sharp knife and chopped the crow's feet from it's body. She looked around for other rare potions and ingredients throwing them into the cauldron while singing a song long forgotten.

"Let's get started, then." The witch looked at the boy with the fiery reflection of the cauldron's spark amidst her emerald eyes. The witch winked at Ace and then began to dance.



Chapter Seven: The Curse

"Ignar Toomay...Dodo Arevengar...e, Presentada... Dislad Ominorous Controllus inda Elderados!"

Olga shouted a series of expressive enchantments from a cult language known only amongst witches. There are many types of witches of all types. As part of the Gray witch covenant, their spells were known to be neither harmful nor beneficial to themselves or others. A combination of White magic and Black magic becomes their practice for neutrality. Their craft often had a twisted effect in which there became conflict between the two extreme forms of magic. It was often seen as a vague continuum without perfection. Practice makes perfect and the witch performed her gray magic.

The swamp came alive. Toads croaked and frogs gave concert as the ritual brought spirits alive with new

energy. Gidget buried her head into her curled body whimpering softly. Her cries were drowned by all the creatures in range. Ace felt an unnatural presence. The flames from the cauldron continued to rise. The trees within range felt a concern as the fire went out of control.

Olga doused the high-rising spirit within with added potions to calm the rising flames. Ace stepped back from the heat. It was a force he immediately wished he had not proclaimed. The witch understood the boy's temperament. She truly wanted to help him discover those sentiments she remembered ages ago when she was in her youth. A lifetime teaches much, but nothing compares to a child searching through experience.

The witch continued to dance and sing along with other strange noises in the darkness beyond. She had not felt such joy in many years. The trees swayed from side to side filling a rhythmic pattern or were they using their leaves and foliage to fan the flames? Drums from below the earth's surface carried the beat. Cracks would appear along the ground. Creatures of the night howled and shouted with excitement from the dark veil of protective cover. Sparks burst from the cauldron timed perfectly to the beat of the

evening dance amidst the darkness. This was more than just an enchanted spell. It was a performance of will. This was a spiritual ceremony to bring something from beyond to Mother earth through force of will.

Ace had stood in front of the cauldron watching the flames while listening to the sounds all around him. It was mesmerizing to him. The headphones he listened while laying in bed in his room at night could never capture such magic forces. The cauldron finally exploded into a green mist that sailed high above and seemed to shoot bolts of lightning into the heavens. The action was brief and suddenly the Dark Forest fell to silence. Not even a cricket could be heard.

Gidget's trance while now laying on her back stopped as well. The boy's dog had been pushing it's feet towards the air running through some nightmare to escape. Ace wasn't quite certain what was going on either. He was focused on the flames while burning brightly until they suddenly blew and had gone away. There was no more light and nothing could be seen in the pitch blackness of the Dark Forest.

Olga lit torches surrounding the ceremonial arena. She whistled a soft song comforting all afterwards. Light

had been discovered again in a world of darkness. The witch made her way around the full circumference of the area. She stopped suddenly and raised her arms into the air.

"It is done." Nothing more was said. The owl fluttered it's wings and made it's way through the forest trees. The witch turned away and vanishing into the Dark Forest.

Ace was exhausted from the night's event. Dawn was breaking and he knew he would need to get back home before his parents woke to find him not in his room. Gidget was uneasy and part unconscious. Ace picked her up carrying his dog for a distance until she revived. It wasn't clear how deep they had been into the forest woods and it was now time for them to make their way back home. A long and distant path still lay ahead and the day would just begin after an entire evening of no sleep. The road back home was more difficult to return than their exploration leaving out on their foolish journey.

Ace finally began to recognize familiar places. Yes, he knew that tree as he had climbed it many times before. He was now close to home. That brought him hope. Gidget trotted along with Ace along the boy's right side.

Ace could hear laughter amongst the trees, or so it seemed. He wasn't quite sure, but his senses seemed more acute than ever and nature often has a cruel sense of humor.

"You are in for a surprise." A voice appeared from some unknown source. Ace looked around the trail and saw no one in particular from whence the voice had come. The boy was already tired and exhausted and sure the forest was still playing tricks within his mind.

"Who's there?" the boy demanded as if to call out the one who was pulling some prank. Gidget began to smell the roots along the path that led straight to an old oak tree.

"Perhaps I am your own sense of self in another form. I am nothing more than what you make of me" was the answer. Ace could not ascertain where the voice was coming from. His curiosity was taking another turn.

"Show yourself!" Ace demanded. He climbed into the tree he had been so familiar with as a child. He wasn't too far from home and his strength was not going to last much longer. He pulled onto one of the branches to get a clear view of his surroundings.

"Easy now. Watch that limb of mine. It's weakened with the many years you've climbed it before. The voice seemed to come from within his own imagination, but it

wasn't his own conscious mind that put the words together. There must be something else beyond his understanding that needed more explanation. "You've more strength than before and will need to get your feet back down on the ground before you bring my limb."

Ace dropped back down to the ground and looked at the tree. He then noticed the bark forming features within the tree resembling a withered face. The tree spoke.

The laughter from the oak trees as they passed through the woods turned to snickered grunts and muffled howls of some comedy in nature. Ace looked at the grinning features on the old tree to ask if there were some evidence to the it's existence.

"I'm nothing more than a tree." The oaken bark texture spoke with just a few words as it had been around for centuries. "You have simply discovered hidden realms of different worlds on the same dimension. The truth to nature is the same as anything else in life. What do you believe?"

"You are part of nature and this isn't natural." Ace demanded more explanation. "Those roots of yours grow as deep into the earth as the highest branches of your limbs. Surely you can explain. There's no more need to laugh." "Ive been out all night and now my imagination is getting the best of me." Ace was certain trees could not talk. More snickering amongst the trees and ruffled leaves waving about. It was a clear day without much wind in the air. The weather was part of nature and could often turn without notice or warning.

"It's dangerous to meddle with nature and things you don't quite understand. Time is your best teacher through experience and life provides all you really need." The words seemed poignant without specific meaning as the tree was giving the boy a lecture similar to his parents.

Now convinced his imagination was nothing more than a hallucination, Ace stated he had to get back home. The trees in the forest bellowed with more laughter and the ground seemed to shake as if an earthquake would split right down the pathway home.

Gidget peed at the base of the oak tree and the laughter suddenly stopped. The facial feature of the oak tree turned to scorn.

"C'mon, Gidget!" Ace called. His dog hurried along the path to catch up. "Let's go home." It wasn't far and there was still time to sneak back through the bedroom window before dawn. With any luck, his parents had been asleep and would never know he had been gone.

The distant sound of laughter from the trees in the woods could be heard again as the boy and his dog made their way back home. It was just ahead.



Chapter Eight: A Price to Pay

It was impossible to reach his reach his bedroom in his parent's house as it was much too high for Ace to reach the window. He remembered there was a small opening in the studio room where he could climb through. If only it wasn't locked and he could fit in such a narrow space. He had not thought the matter through to the end to prepare to get back into the house.

Fortunately, the window was not locked. Gidget would fit through just fine through the small gap, but there was the matter of numerous objects upon the desk which faced the window. Ace decided to go in first just to see if he could fit. His head barely made it through as he sucked in his gut to fit with his hands outstretched to perform impressive acrobatic skills not to knock over the antique decor. The table lamp was exotic as he barely scraped it while trying to avoid the old world globe on the stand next

to an impressive antique vase surrounded by some fake orchids displayed in wooden oval containers. One of the many candles gave way from the added weight and fell to the floor without much disturbance. Ace reached back to the window once he regained his balance and pulled his dog through to the top of the desk. From there, Gidget hopped to the floor recognizing they were back home.

"We've gotta be quiet, girl," the master spoke to his dog. "Let's not wake them while we make our way to our bedroom.

He reflected at great length about the curse he had put on his parents, not knowing what to expect as a result. Ace was just glad to be back home early enough to avoid detection. He would sneak back upstairs and roll into bed as if nothing happened. He wanted to avoid more lectures from his father about responsibility.

He heard rumbling noises above on the second floor. His parents must be awake.

"Okay, Gidget here's the story." Ace thought up a reason why they were not in their room. "We'll tell them you had jumped through the window and I had to come save you!"

It would need to sound convincing as to avoid confrontation. After all, rules are rules and his alibi would should be enough to show respect for his parents. Slowly he crept up the steps and entered the living room hallway. He heard a commotion just beyond in the kitchen. His parents were already awake and appeared to be angry at one another.

"Oh, No!" Ace thought as if he would soon be discovered. Surely, his disappearance would not cause such a disturbance as his parents began to shout at one another. Something was out of place. That's when shock and horror fell on the boy with what he saw next.

His parents had diminished in height in half their normal size of adult stature. Undeveloped facial features as if they were children. Both were fighting over a piece of bologna from the refrigerator and casting paper towels at one another. It all seemed surreal to Ace as he witnessed his parents building up such petty drama.

"That was MINE! GIVE IT BACK!" His mother was screaming at his father like a kid. Odd that his parents were fighting over a piece of bologna. Ace had to break them apart and separate them from the argument.

"What happened to you both?" was the question
Ace had on his mind suspecting full well his curse had
already taken effect. He wasn't expecting such drama with
the two of them fighting like children. Ace noticed much of
the kitchen was in disarray as if this had been going on all
evening.

"Bout time you got here. I wanted that bologna and your daddy took it away from me!" was his mother's response. Just like rival siblings, his two parent's seemed to be at odds with sharing. That was unusual. Ace found himself in a position of compromising the situation. What was he to do?

"Can you cut it in half and share?" was his response. The feud grew more intensive with more shouting.

"He doesn't like to share and only wanted it because I wanted it for myself!" Jules stuck her tongue out at him as many children often do to demoralize and disrespect her husband. Frank began chomping on the bologna proving he had an appetite for destruction. Ace quickly realized his curse from Olga the witch in the Dark Forest had come true. It wasn't what he expected and now he would have to deal with his parents childish behavior.

Ace walked over to the refrigerator and peeked inside. "There's some of dad's chicken he grilled recently. There's plenty of things to eat. Mom has leftover roast as well. Why are you arguing about the last slice of bologna?"

Ace realized at that moment his new challenge would be maintaining peace between his childish parents.

"You both are gonna have to learn to share from now on." Rational thinking in the boy's mind as to how to quickly manage conflict. As an only child, Ace never really had to share amongst others, but knew enough about sacrificing certain things to keep the peace.

Ace took Gidget to his bedroom to wrap his mind around the events when he noticed his parent's room was also in complete disarray. Pillows were cast all over the floor and clothes had been dumped from the closets. His parents had indeed turned back in time and had become children themselves. His dog settled in her crate as Ace took a moment to reflect. This was not what he intended. He simply wanted a curse in which his revenge would simply be to avoid confrontation. Instead, he was now dealing with even more responsibility than before.

The boy needed some plan of action. He could still hear the two arguing in the kitchen about several topics.

Frank would slap his hand on the table giving orders while Jules would stomp back and forth on the kitchen floor tiles.

"Your gonna break those tiles, Jules," the father claimed. She would shoot back at him, "You're gonna break the kitchen table if you don't stop pounding it with your fist!" It was a pitiful exhibition of which could do more damage.

Ace felt heartbroken seeing them this way. He had an enormous sense of guilt as the strangest things were unfolding right before his eyes. He now began to wonder about how things would change in his own life with their erratic behavior and sudden changes. All the things he never truly appreciated as their child had brought about a role reversal within his parent's home.

"What about baseball?" More questions came to mind. "What about grilling out and mom's cooking? What about all the cool stuff they would buy me? Music CD's and video games?"

"I guess it's now up to me to take care of them both...but how?" Ace wasn't prepared for this circumstance. "Who's gonna get groceries, medicines, and simple needs? I don't work, so I can't buy all that stuff." Ace was too young to drive and apparently his parents were smaller than he was himself. "How are we going to survive like this?"

The boy began to wonder about many things. He has a mountain bike and can get around town. Maybe pick up a few groceries with his backpack. The ball park wasn't too far either, so he could leave out early to make the games in time.

"Maybe I can get one of the other kid's parents to help with things." His mind was running through any option he could think of to solve the predicament. He would feel embarrassed to explain the circumstance.

That's when he though about Olga the witch. "Surely she can reverse the curse and return my parents to normal again." He considered carefully and would need to go back into the Dark Forest again. The boy imagined everything could be back to normal. That seemed to be his best option at the moment. Gidget barked as if to agree, but she was lost amidst the howling of his parents still bickering over bologna and other things.

Meanwhile Ace thought more about the situation and his new responsibilities. He wanted to get out of the house and clear his mind. His bike was in the garage and he could take Gidget for an adventure. He could test out his ability to multitask and perhaps impress his parents by running an errand to the store with his backpack. He walked back into the kitchen where it appeared his parents had calmed down for a minute.

"I'm gonna make a bike run to the grocery store," he proclaimed. "Y'all need anything while I'm there?"

"More bologna...and some beer," his father Frank recommended.

"I'm too young to buy beer," Ace pointed out.
"Besides, I can't carry too much weight in my backpack.
What about you, mom...do you need anything."

"Your father tossed the paper in the woods and I threw out the bread so he couldn't make a sandwich!" It appeared the boy was doing more harm than good as his parents began to bicker again.

"Oh, boy." Ace counted his breath realizing how difficult it was to become a parent. It certainly was no picnic. "C'mon, Gidget. Let's go on an adventure!" Ace rounded up his mountain bike and the boy and his dog took the dirt road shortcut through the fields to enjoy the scenic route and avoid the busy streets. Gidget had to stop and sniff numerous areas for critters, but they made good time

in getting to the nearby convenient store. There was nothing convenient about his new tasks, but it gave Ace a breath of fresh air to clear his head. There were too many things to consider and the run to the store with Gidget felt like mental therapy.

The boy pulled his bike around, attaching to the bike stand when he noticed another bike similar to his own. "Now you stay here and be a good girl," Ace coaxed Gidget to wait while he went inside to see what he could take back home.

Inside the store, he noticed a familiar face. It was his teammate Jack doing some shopping as well. Ace approached him with curiosity.

"Imagine finding you here of all places. Is that your bike out there on the rack?"

"Yep. Thought I would get out for a little exercise and save my old man the trouble with a few items," Jack professed. It appeared the two had much in common. The same type of baseball glove, similar mountain bikes and shopping at the grocery store at the same time. It seemed more than coincidence.

"I'm doing the same for my folks," Ace stated to perhaps get to know Jack better. He was always alone with himself on the team and seemed to avoid the other kids. Ace didn't want to pry, but 'the old man' reference gave him a clue that he was taking care of him. Another thing they had in common. "My parents have been acting a little strange lately. I brought my dog to give her a little fun in the sun. Do you live nearby? Maybe we can get together sometime."

"Not far," Jack confessed. "Sure. We'll get to know each other soon enough. I got what I need, but I'll see you around." With that the strange kid checked out with a few items and headed out while Ace went looking for necessities. Jack appeared to have a similar backpack as Ace. It was all too surreal a day for strange happenings. He filled his bag with as much as he could ride back. He unlocked his bike and called Gidget for the adventure challenge as it was now an uphill battle for the most part. He would be exhausted by the time he got back home. The boy hoped his parents would appreciate his efforts.

He stopped to push his bike once or twice. Gidget didn't mind slowing down either as it gave her a chance to sniff out more of the wildlife in the fields. Ace couldn't wait to get back to what seemed to be a normal life. He wanted his own childhood back. Instead, he was now

moving at a pace faster than the speed of light and felt like he was going to miss his own chance to enjoy life again.

Meanwhile, Ace was feeling more strength in his legs. That is advantageous for pitchers. Most of the great ones in the Major Leagues have exceptional leg strength. It's just as important as having a strong arm. Dreaming of making it to the Big Leagues took away his immediate concerns. It's every boy's dream to play at that level. He was now committed to a hard work effort as few make it.

Perhaps there may be a silver lining to the most tragic of circumstances. The boy understood what that meant now that he is being confronted with taking care of his own parents. He thought there must be a solution to any problem and he would need to work through it to get there.

He thought more about Olga the witch. His hopes were high with the black magic of an ancient time to help when he needed it most. Hopefully, he and Gidget could get some rest before tracking again through the Dark Forest. He would need to rebuild his strength and courage, but it will be worth the effort in the end should the witch become capable of reversing the curse.

The only immediate issue would be concerns with his parents while he is out. He was considering a baby sitter

at this point to ensure they behave. Strange idea as it were, but not too far off the reservation.

"Preposterous!" Ace felt it had merit, but had already set his mind to taking care of his own business. Besides, it seemed silly to bring in outsiders for the curse he placed on his parents in the first place. He would just need to risk it and hope for the best. His mother and father had been fighting all day and most likely would be too tired for more squabbling. "A good night's rest would be the best thing for them both," he surmised. "Maybe that's how it would be."

Ace stopped again at the church at the end of the street from his parent's home. It wasn't his parent's church and he had never been inside. None were there as church was not in session, so he peeked through the window and began to think more about God and having faith. There was nothing special as it was simply a basic gathering for locals. A few pews lined in a row and the stand where the preacher would give his sermon. His parents church was much more fancy. Ace was sent to early morning Sunday school as a child. He felt he was too young for that sort of thing and eventually stopped going. Besides, most of the other kids seemed obnoxious and uninterested in the stories

from the Bible. Neither was Ace. It all seemed too fantastic and believing in something you cannot see is difficult.

"I will be tested, I'm sure." Home was just up the curved street. He got back on his bike as Gidget followed his lead. Ace checked the mail. Nothing important, but he knew bills would be coming soon. How are his parents going to deal with those? Neither of them were computer savvy and wrote out checks. It was old school, but Jules took care of most of the finances. Would she be able to continue? There was much to consider and determine if either could work together as before. Now it was all on Ace to work through the problems and find solutions.

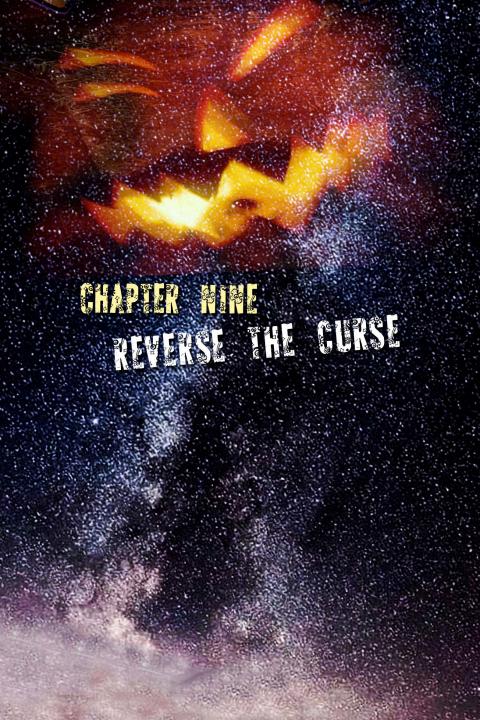
Ace walked through the door to put away the items. He could hear his father watching television. His mom was asleep on the living room couch. Ace did not want to disturb either one of them as they had distanced themselves for the moment. He simply took Gidget outside for a few minutes to familiar territory. They then went back inside his room to take a nap before the sun would fade on what seemed to be the darkest day of his life.

Dreams began to swirl like a kaleidoscope. Perhaps Ace was hallucinating. He could no longer focus on reality. He dozed for what seemed a lifetime, but only a short time had passed. Gidget had rested enough as well for another adventure. There was still plenty of sunshine in the late afternoon and his parents were still dividing themselves. They both needed a break of their own to calm their nerves. Now seemed like the chance to get an early start towards the Dark Forest.

Ace planned to go by the old Oak tree to possibly get some advice. Nature's tallest elders seemed wise with knowledge. "No doubt the old tree can provide some answers" as the boy had a ton of questions. Like as not, there would be laughter amongst the trees.

With that the two snuck out the back door and this time the boy was smart enough to unlock a few windows and doors as an easier means to get back into the house.

"Come on, girl," Ace called to his loving companion. "It's time to back and see the old witch."



Chapter Nine: Reverse the Curse

More laughter from the oak trees as Ace and Gidget passed down the gateway through the woods towards the Dark Forest. Snickered grunts and muffled howls as if the comedy of nature hinted of more treachery. Ace looked at the grinning features on the old oak tree to ask if he had some advice to his current predicament.

"I am nothing more than a tree." The oaken bark texture moved about as it spoke just a few words. It had been around for centuries yet did not have the wisdom for anything such as parents turning into children.

"You are part of nature and this isn't natural." Ace demanded some explanation as he knew there was more to this than what could be seen above ground. "Those roots of yours grow as deep into the earth as the highest branches of your limbs. Surely you have advice that will help. There's

no more need to laugh when this situation is completely out of hand "

More snickering amongst the trees. Ruffled leaves waved about despite the lack of wind in the air. It had been a clear day, but the weather could often turn without notice or warning. Night was falling and Ace felt insecure. The unpredictabilities were finally closing the curtains on daylight.

Ace was seeking help amongst those nature elders of the Dark Forest. The strange noises brought a howl from Gidget. Something didn't smell quite right.

The boy sought the council of the Oak tree wanting to know if the black magic could reverse the curse on his parents. It was if the mysterious trees in the Dark Forest had no answers, yet were well entertained by the dilemma.

"Err, well...There's not much that can be done once you've done it." The tree offered no comfort for the boy. "You can try to amend a broken limb, but it's never really the same. You've broken many of mine in your youtful nature without realizing the damage. Children are often reckless. Trees can grow more limbs over time and perhaps the seasons can bring you the understanding you seek in

life." The tree went on to tell the boy how creativity and an active imagination can serve one well to get beyond reality. Ace explained how his imagination was at times a burden.

"How so?" the Oak tree wanted to know.

"I often pretend I am something I'm not. It gets me in trouble at times...especially when it comes to being responsible." Ace contended.

"You are learning much about yourself...your own strengths and weaknesses," stated the Oak tree."We have watched you play in your back yard. Yes, very entertaining with creative imagination. Do your best to find yourself again...but like as not, you will change and hopefully for the better.".

The boy nodded towards the textured face within the old Oak tree Ace had climbed as a boy. He thanked the tree for his due attention. Gidget squatted to pee just in front of the old Oak tree. It's barken face frowned as it's limbs moved in animated disgust. The remaining branches were trying desperately to contain the scent.

The path seemed longer than the previous evening's journey. Clouds began to darken and hover overhead the Dark Forest. A late afternoon rain shower developed as the air molecules heated withdrawing the moisture. The dense

forest also gave way to windward changes. Leaves began to dance in random motion. The Dark Forest stretched to uncertain end as Ace and Rex struggled to make their way through the distant path beyond.

High-pitched calls of various amphibians along with the low bellowing of croaking toads orchestrated the forest in a distant swamp. It was as if nature had it's own soundtrack. Most likely nature was looking for mates as the sky darkened.

"It's gonna rain again soon," Ace warned Gidget leading the way. Her nose was pressed to the ground moving forward with greater speed. A Whip-poor-will chimed in with the music. "Dad always said when you hear one of those birds it brings rain." Gidget had instincts and wasn't much concerned about the weather report. The boy's dog was just happy to be waltzing along in another adventure. It didn't matter to her where they were going or what they were doing. She had relieved herself and was ready for any kind of action.

They turned into the encampment where they had been just the night before. It was empty and seemed abandoned. The large iron cauldron was still there with only a few embers in the ashes. The two looked around for the witch to appear. They called out her name as she would suddenly appear from thin air.

"Olga! Olga! Are you here?" The darkened clouds set themselves like a veil as it covered the dusk skyline. Night was a contrast to the many days before. Happiness seemed a distant memory. The boy's heart was hardening as the big white owl flew towards them. It swerved just above the lone rangers in the woods and rested it's talons on a large tree. There was something odd about the peculiarities that were going on and Ace could not quite make out what was occurring. Something was upon the large branch next to the owl in the tree. It looked out of place. Ace was more focused on finding the witch.

Mist from the Dark Forest transformed the elements of the earth and the old witch suddenly appeared before the boy. She had aged centuries since the previous evening as time wore upon her face. Ace barely recognized the old woman. Perhaps it was the trick of lights from the flaming cauldron before that offered more radiant light. Still, the boy stood firmly upon the ground to confront the witch.

"Something went wrong with the spell," He stated emphatically. "The curse turned my parents into children. That is *NOT* what I wished to happen."

"Testy!" The witch wasn't one for sympathetic apologies. "Curses take on the elements of black magic forces and may not turn out as you perceive. You wanted to curse your parents and that became the circumstance."

Obviously, there was some misunderstanding and for all Ace's explanations to place blame on the witch, she had no further testimony in her defense.

"My parents are now behaving like children and I have become responsible for them. That's not what I had in mind." His argument with Olga left no more impression on her weary and wrinkled face. His unabated pleas to reverse the curse offered no recourse from the mind of a lonesome witch living deep within the dark forest in her own abode.

His insults were a last resort telling her how disappointed he was in her willpower and that her magic potions were nothing more than some black magic art that was less than pathetic towards mankind's strife and suffering.

Olga was proof of the undeniable notion much of witchcraft was apathetic towards the concerns of those who turned to witches seeking help through dark magic. Witches today reveal their scars and wrinkled age from their own turbulence throughout history. There was once a time in

which those women provided a need for others in good spirit, but their soul image had become tarnished and beaten down from just a few bad apples without the secret knowledge needed to help raise the spiritual world for a greater good. Witches had become less than human and nothing more than a fantastic reign of terror for All Hallow's Eve.

Most lived a solitary life keeping to themselves without the burdens of others and that may have been the case with Olga. She no longer had much dealing or responsibilities with mankind. She was a witch living in the Dark Forest with no more desire for other people's problems.

Ace was determined to get her attention. He hit a nerve in the old woman with insults. Her emerald eyes began to gleam with all the raging fury within what was left in her heart and soul. The curse had become a reality and the boy needed the witch to make things the way they were before

"Reverse the Curse?" She shouted at the boy. There was an explosion inside her as if the cauldron was boiling over in her soul. "I would if I could, but I've lost me confounded Book of Potions and Recipes!" Without her

book, the witch had no scripture to perform dark magic. "Buggers if I know where it is. Been looking for it since last night's spell! I can't help you, boy. No need to put up a fight with me! I am not the one to blame. You did this to yourself and must face your own consequences!"

That was enough for a hard-learned lesson in life. Ace hung his head because he knew he had only himself to blame. He could not change the past and for all the reasons in his own heart, he had to deal with the wrong choices he created for himself. It wasn't worth further argument as the witch was right in saying she was only trying to help.

"I'm sorry, Olga" he apologized. "You're right. It was my fault. I just wasn't expecting the results to turn out the way they did. Those were not the wishes I had in mind." He turned and began to walk away.

The witch did have a heart and understood the pain inside the boy's dilemma. Ace did apologize to her with sincere significance and that was a rare quality of most humans...especially children. It was rare indeed. A small tear began to flow down her face as she had never received an apology from anyone before. She turned in one direction and turned back again. It was a struggle within herself as

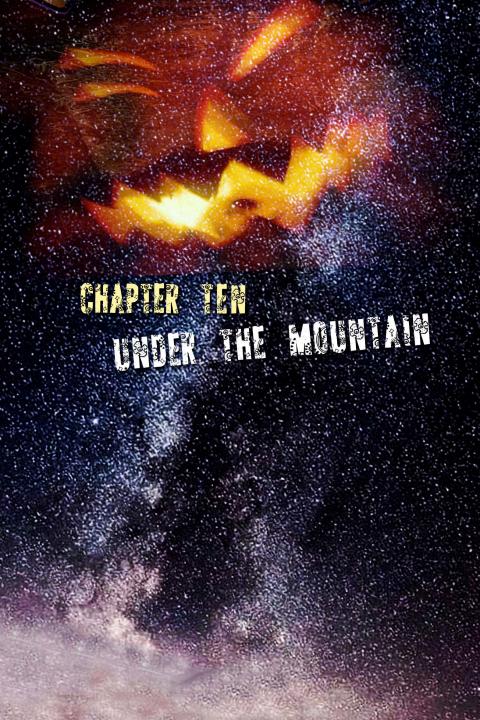
much as others and she finally called the boy as he walked away.

"There's a castle upon the mountaintop where wizards and sorcerers learn the secrets of dark magic." She pointed to the mountain range in the distance. "It's a school for Wizards, Warlocks and Sinister Sorcery. Perhaps they can help you with your problems."

It seemed like quite a hike and may take hours to get to the mountaintop. Ace was looking for answers and knew he wasn't going to find them without much sacrifice. He looked down at Gidget for his pet's reaction. His dog turned her head to the side inquisitively as if to suggest they had nothing to lose. Clouds gathered and it looked as if it were about to rain. The thunder and lightning in the distance was enough evidence the boy and his dog may be in for stormy weather.

As Ace and his dog began their journey, the big white out did another close flyby just above them as if would lead them on their way. As it did so, the object from the branch of the tree fell to the ground without their notice. It was Olga's Book of Potions and Recipes. The book would be discovered soon enough, but Ace and Gidget were already headed down the path towards their next

adventure to visit the school for Wizards, Warlocks and Sinister Sorcery.



Chapter Ten: Under the Mountain

The rain began to pour unexpectedly all the while Ace and Gidget made their way up the mountain. Climbing through the mud-stained path was a challenge in the stormy weather and both were drenched from the elements. A rock wall underpass helped protect them from the rain. The cooling temperatures made each moment of existence seem more challenging and the two wanted nothing more than to get to where they were going and back again to the way things were. As if the boy and his dog needed another obstacle, nature had the means to become another setback.

Ace rubbed his pet's fur to wipe away the excess shivering. Gidget was twenty-four pounds of solid drenched muscle. She preferred not to be out in the rain, but had a sense the trail would lead to warmer weather. Their destination across the mountain range was a bitter

sacrifice and neither were certain where they were going. They only knew the answer was in front of them rather than past mistakes. Their search for resolution kept them going. Waiting was the hardest part of their journey until the storm could subside.

Both sighed simultaneously. Patience was not Ace's strength, but they simply had to wait for the rain to pass. Thunderclaps above shook the rock wall. Lightning flashed. It squinted their eyes while they noticed that within the cavernous wall, a shelter could be seen to escape the downpour. The rock wall began to crumble and trapped them on the inside. Rocks had fallen to block their exit. There was no escape within the mountain of complete darkness.

Gidget whimpered while rocks continued to fall within. Ace covered her from the falling debris. Another thunderous roar shook the foundation of the mountainside. Another flash of lightning struck overhead. The ground felt it would crack beneath them with the slightest rumble from the storm. The two began to plummet towards the inner earth landing in a pool of water beneath the earth's surface. The pouring rain outside left doubt as to how to make their

way back. Both boy and dog were considering their options. It was too late. There was no choice but to follow the only path under the mountain. They had made it this far and were determined to find their way through nature's turbulence

They were uncertain how far they had fallen. The surface above left them in a pool of doubt. The stench of stagnant water they had fallen into rescued them from greater harm. Ace spat the water from his lungs and nostrils. Gidget did the same sneezing and shaking her ears until she could breath and use her nasal cavity above water. She sniffed her way back to safety to solid ground. Ace followed just behind as he lifted her exhausted canine spirit. Still making their way through the darkness of the cavern, a dim light from some reflective chasm within provided hope.

"I see light," Ace shouted. Perhaps the light at the end of the tunnel. Stalactites pushed down like dragon teeth from the top of the mountain's inner sanctum. Crystals formed along the side reflecting light from a distant source.

Gidget continued to shake off the stench. The reflective lights in the tunnel were a glorious welcome to the storm and rain outside

"This must be the way out," Ace observed and speculated. They followed the tunnel's path until they ascended steps to higher ground. It was a dirty mound passage that led like a stairway to heaven from within the Hell of darkness.

"C'mon, Girl!" Ace knew time was becoming a factor. His parents were left alone and their condition would not change until he could make his way through the challenges that he now faced. Somewhere on top of the mountain was a school in which wizards may be able to help with magic to turn his parents back to normal. Nothing was certain and the inner core of the mountain continued to deepen his doubt about what he was doing. The only positive force was Gidget sniffing her way through the tunnels. There were a few options that led in other directions, but she stayed the course following the straight path leading upwards.

Ace's shoe was beginning to unravel. He took the extra laces from one to tie around the end to keep it together. He thought about an often used expression his father told about how nobody can wear the shoes you walk in life. That made more sense now that even his own shoes were falling apart. The boy also thought of his mom and

how she had so many responsibilities taking care of family matters. Few could walk in her shoes without damage to their own feet

Just ahead Ace discovered a hallway lit with flaming torches. Another winding stairway led to a passage upwards. The boy and his dog could feel a breeze. Gidget pressed forward. The top of the mountain could not be far. Progressive steps forward following the light beyond the darkness brought optimism and hope. A renewed rush of energy sparked their urge to continue along the path.

Torches were now in alignment providing beacons and signals for direction. The two picked up their pace.

Suddenly, Gidget bolted ahead. The dog sensed something just beyond. She felt it was now her duty to protect Ace from harm. Ace stopped in his tracks listening to her barking and growling fiercely. Something was looming just around the corner. He looked around the torchlit cavern and found a large stick and a sizable stone. Something just ahead had provoked his dog to protect his master. The boy stepped carefully through another narrow path into a wider opening in the cavern.

Flames along the walls indicated human existence that had recently produced the lighted path. Someone or

something was lighting the way and Gidget continued to bark and growl. Ace could hear her closing in on something threatening. He ran and turned into an open area filled with more stalagmites and stalactites above and below. It was difficult to make out what was happening behind all the cavern obstacles. Gidget ran in circles around some large creature in the middle of the structure. Ace could not see exactly what it was, but had a sense of danger. He gripped the large stick tightly in his hand with the stone in his pitching hand. A large silhouette of some creature moved about within the cavern. Ace finally caught up to the scene and stared upon the creature. Massive in size as Gidget continued to dance around and run in circles. The creature finally turned and Ace could now see more clearly from the lit torches along the wall. His mouth dropped in disbelief!

It was a cave troll of some kind or so Ace thought. Legendary beasts that dwelled within the mountains. The sheer size of it was beyond belief with horns protruding on the beast's forehead with large ears protruding on each side. It's teeth had an appetite for destruction with yellow eyes that opened wide to see in the dark. Something evil and terrible was threatening their way through the underneath passage.

Ace had heard rumors about giant beasts within the mountains. It seemed all too fantastic with giant monsters in reality. This was no longer his imagination as the troll appeared now before his very own eyes. There was not much time to prepare for battle strategy as his adrenaline took control of his bloodstream. It was fight or flight.

Ace hurled the stone at the troll's head striking right between it's glowing eyes. The attack only annoyed the giant beast. Gidget continued to distract the troll and bolted forward in an attempt to bite it on the leg. She barely slipped through it's hands and darted between the monster's legs. Ace had just enough time to swing the large stick against it's head. The troll was clumsy and the blow knocked him back stumbling into one of the stalactites.

Ace swung again...and again before the beast had a chance to recover. It appeared unconscious, yet still on it's feet. Speed and agility was the only thing working to the boy's advantage in the fight. Before the beast regained it's footing, Ace lunged forward raising the stick and swung as hard as he could. The troll toppled over and fell to the floor with a thunderous boom!

The cavern halls quaked the earth with crumbling rocks, stalagmites and stalactites crashing to the floor. Echoes from all the destruction finally gave way to silence.

The beast had fallen.

It's horrific golden eyes had now faded to a black emptiness within it's soul. Thunder from above had made it's way inside the mountain as debris had piled high upon the beast. Chaos and terror had been defeated in an avalanche of destruction.

Dismayed as they were, Ace and Gidget looked upon the scene with relief. It was short-lived as they knew they had to make their way above ground. As fast as their exhausted legs could carry their weight, they crawled over the destruction and all the obstacles along the path. They were fortunate to have avoided the crushing blow of the event.

Ace still carried the stick to help defend against more falling debris. It seemed pointless in his hands within a mountain of terror that would inevitably take their fate. There was little hope but he held it high for protection. There was little air to breath as both trudged forward along the path before them.

The two coughed the ashes that filled the air. They needed to make their way out from all the danger. Death was certain if they did not continue towards an escape from peril.

A last gasp brought the two forward in a leap of faith. There was a blinding flash of light. Ace was not clear as all his memories rushed through his head in an instance. He was uncertain after such a turn of events if he would survive.

Light was just ahead. He felt a breeze as if the wind had just pushed through the mountain from some spiritual source above. The boy and his dog were now close to the top of the mountain.

"Just follow the light" Ace thought. "Just follow the light."



Chapter Eleven: Virgil, the Wizard

"So, there it is!"

Those were the first words Ace heard after he and Gidget collapsed upon the floor. Both had been unconscious for what seemed an eternity. They were awaked by a stranger's voice standing over them. Neither boy nor dog could understand the meaning of the words spoken.

Ace's eyes were filled with dirt and ash. His body bruised from fallen rocks and his vision was slow to adjust to reality. Someone was standing before him. It wasn't clear, but the boy was alive and felt the lick on his face from his dog, Gidget.

"I've been looking for this for years. Ever since I first began school." A middle-aged man wearing a purple costume with a tall, pointed brimmed hat stood over them

with a delighted smile on it's bearded face. He gave the impression of an elderly gentleman, but seemed to have a much younger disposition.

"What is that?" the young boy asked the man, not fully understanding the meaning behind his sudden appearance after what he considered inevitable death from a cave troll.

"My staff, of course!" The man answered. He took the stick from Ace and held it up with his left hand and then lowered his right arm to lift the boy from the debris of fallen earth.

"I remember now running through this very tunnel and stumbling over some rocks. I must've dropped it in here and had forgotten all about it. Good thing you found it," the stranger surmised.

"It's just a stick I found in the cave to fight the troll." Ace had still not fully recovered his mental awareness and finally stood up on his feet wiping the dirt from his face.

"Ogre, actually," the older man lectured. "Not many know the difference. Trolls are more human and difficult to recognize while ogres are hideous creatures that lure humans into their lair."

The wizard seemed to enjoy the sound of his own voice and continued to use the remaining oxygen left in the remaining debris from the cavern's collapse.

"You must have the gift as well if you thought it was nothing more than a stick. Only those with true creativity can wield the powers of imagination and turn nature's energy into such a force of reckoning. You defended yourself well using my old staff."

"Who are you?" Ace asked as he was just coming to his senses and not clear if he still existed in the world of reality or if hallucinations had taken control of his creative mind.

"I am Virgil. Senior class Wizard at Brighton's School of Wizards, Warlocks, and Sorcery." The man seemed enthusiastic about his introduction. There was something not quite assertive about the wizard and his sudden appearance in the cave.

"I will soon become a five star class Wizard. Only one more test before I graduate. The star represents the five essential points of Wizardry. I earned the 'Woods Owl Badge of Honor' in my sophomore year. Very proud of that achievement if I must admit to myself. Wisdom is not in knowledge, but making the right choice decision at the given time. Then there's 'Priority of Management.' Often difficult for those who need to focus on the big picture. Most think management is delegating and telling others what to do. No! Much more complicated for wizards in that it is about removing barriers for others to succeed. I must admit I barely got through that level, but I passed and earned the blue gown."

The wizard continued with his long winded description of what seemed to be his life history. "Natural Ability was a breeze. Most wizards can easily turn the forces of nature into another compound element that can be used for entertainment such as fireworks...or even defense against dark magic. That's what happened to you as you used my old staff to defend yourself against the ogre. That's why I think you have the gift. You should enroll in our school."

Ace was just about to speak when the wizard cut off his facial expression and began to speak louder than before.

"CREATIVITY! Now there's an aspect of life that many never consider. It is much more simple than most think in that it's all about problem solving solutions. Unconventional means and abstract concepts are gifts used to propel knowledge. I learned that in my fourth year. I received honors for the recognition" he went on to admit as if he were interviewing with a prospective resume.

"Most wizards are educated by knowledge and understanding of the world at large. Those with creativity are the greatest of wizards. That of which are the wisest have the greatest imagination."

"I do have an imagination!" Ace threw in a line just to break up the monotony of the wizard's voice. Virgil stopped to think about the last point on the star. The wizard explained only one final task to be done before he would be accepted into as a full class wizard.

"Excellent! Yes, we must get you signed up right away." The wizard was very enthusiastic about the boy's chances and opportunities to become a wizard. Another rant about the intricacies of wizardry and those challenges he faced as a boy led to further commentary about the old man's life.

"I'll bet your parent's are very proud of you and your achievements." The wizard went off on another rant telling stories of his own parents and their expectations of himself in a world of wizardry. The boy's curiosity began to wane with every word the wizard crafted. The telling was inspirational, but not quite the same. Knowledge is based on tested factual evidence and not hypothesis. How could the wizard know of the Parent Curse?"

It did appear they had much in common, yet there were differences of opinion. Ace finally was able to speak and puzzled the wizard with a simple question.

"What if your parents became children while you were a child. What would you do?"

"Ah..." The wizard contemplated the best answer to the boys question. Despite the scholarly level he had reached at Brighton's School of Wizards, Warlocks, and Sorcery, there was a long pause to think through the correct means of negotiation about a more personal issue than universal magic. "My parents never understood me. I had the gift and they wanted other paths for me to take in life. That's all I can really say as I discovered myself on my own. I would give them the freedom of choice on their own."

"I'm gonna be a major league pitcher and dad grounded me for losing my baseball glove. It's not fair." Ace then pointed to Gidget. "My dog chewed up my glove and I had to borrow another from a friend just to play. I pitched well and we won the game, so I don't understand why I've been grounded. I went to the witch in the dark forest to put a curse on them and now they've turned into children. I was hoping someone here could help reverse the curse."

"I see." The wizard was still dazed and confused about speaking more on a personal level about issues with family. His beard sank into his shoulder until he came up with an idea. "CREATIVITY!" Virgil shouted. A spark in his mind to help resolve the matter. "Young Man, this gives me an idea for such a challenge. Should I succeed, I will gain the final merit and my fifth star to officially gain my excellence in wizard lore. It's a solution for us both."

The wizard appeared excited beyond his own confidence as he revealed his plan to Ace. He even picked Gidget off the ground and held her to emphasize the caring need of selling himself. "Yes, I must now face the final task in Performance Evaluation that combines all the other factors involved with Wizard execution. The challenge determines my worth within the Kingdom of Magic. Yours is a story that I can easily resolve given the fact that you can bring your parents to our school for transformation."

Ace just wanted to be a major league pitcher in life, but was now being sold into some promise from a want-to-be wizard as an excuse to determine the fate of the boy's own personal dilemma. Was it worth the risk? At this point Ace wasn't sure but agreed to the compromising solution as the old man seemed determined and there was nothing left to lose.

"You will need my old staff to work the magic to guide them to our castle." The wizard explained to the boy. "They may be unwilling to follow your lead, but nature often takes it's course with positive energy and you will need that to overcome their own resistance to what may be best for their own good."

Ace was beginning to feel more comfortable with the idea. Perhaps the path imagined for yourself can only be achieved with the help from others. He held the stick high in the air. A flash of light was emitted from the wizard's old staff and Ace found both he and Gidget back home instantly.

"Whoa!" Ace shouted as he looked at Gidget in the comfort of their own back yard. It was his parent's home. "There is good magic and perhaps that is what we need to reverse the curse."

There was no challenge of walking back through the mountains through the dark forest past the old witch...nor the snickers and laughter from the trees as both found themselves instantly on the pitching mound in their back yard. That was enough to provide all the confidence needed to take his parents to the Brighton School of Wizards, Warlocks, and Sorcery for his new friend to perform a spell on his parents that would turn them back to normal.

"Human nature," Ace thought as it all seemed to be something he was just beginning to understand. Call it magic, karma, belief or whatever title to define the laws of inspiration. Whatever works within yourself helps to determine your own destiny. Each can be his or her own worst enemy at times and the only falling grace is truth.

"What is the truth?" Ace wondered. His mind was so filled with imagination that it all had become a spinning wheel of confusion. Witch curses, Cave Trolls (or Ogres if the wizard prefers, and magic from an old stick that could bring him back home. It all seemed too incredible to realize

As a child, Ace was nothing but a student of his own parent's behavior. They did not know the underlying principles of his own accord that involved the same search

in everyone. No two are alike and there would be differences of opinion. That would be both the joy and the tragedy of life's drama. It seemed justice that he now shouldered the burden for his own wrongdoings. Guilt. Life wasn't fair and perhaps a little magic would bring things back to normalcy. At least, that was his hope.

The old witch had become senile losing her book of 'Magic Potions and Physical Transformations' and Ace was now dealing with circumstances beyond his control. A little magic seemed to be the next best course of action and he had Virgil the Wizard to help.



Chapter Twelve: Home Again

"Where HAVE YOU BEEN!" Ace's mother shouted as he walked through the door. There was nothing more charming to warm the boy's heart than his return to an overwhelming sensation of criticism. His father added more fuel to the fire with accusations of abandonment as he needed his son to perform a few necessary chores.

"We need groceries! Bills need to be paid! The lawn needs to be mowed. The pumpkins and other vegetables NEED watering!" The list grew with every breath his parents shouted with voices carrying the saliva from the frustrations of their child's new responsibilities. One thing at a time was the only true method as not everything could be done at once. His parents were in rapid fire with so many chores to be done and multitasking was their new expectation.

"You need to go pick up mom's pills at the pharmacy, the bird's need more seed, and when are you going to get around to cleaning your own room?" It was an avalanche of his parents quake that fell upon the boy trying to dodge the rubble. He could not wrap his mind around all that needed to be done and all he really wanted to do was go outside to play and throw his baseball as hard as he could against the concrete wall.

"One thing at a time!" Ace cried out in his own defense. It seemed a matter of priority to what was most important. Some things were necessary while others could be resolved as needed. "I *NEED* the two of you to help me help you!" the boy declared as his own patience was wearing thin. He didn't mind learning his lessons about responsibility as that was all part of growing up, but his parents had now become far too demanding in their expectations.

"I'll get on my bike and ride down to the pill store. It's only a few miles away and I can cut through the woods along a trail I know. I'll be back in no time. I can pick up some things while I am out on the way back at the convenient store. What do you need?" Ace was learning to

negotiate and put his parents to the test with more specifics they had in mind.

"Well?" He asked again to engage their response. His parents were now trying to determine what they wanted. It was their time to think through the problems. The moment turned to silence as they contemplated their answers.

"RAT-A-TAT TAT, RAT-A-TAT TAT!"

Suddenly, there was a noise that sounded like rapidfire machine guns. Each dove to the floor to avoid the bullets. Frank quickly ran to the corner behind the living room chair. Jules dove underneath the kitchen table. Ace simply lay low where he once stood while Gidget crawled next to him. She shivered as the noise continued.

It took the family a moment to realize a red-bellied woodpecker was banging it's beak upon the aluminum gutter of the house. The rapid succession of noise served multiple purposes. One to declare the bird's territory as a warning to others. Another to release frustrations of expectations when their food source had been diminished.

"OK! Let me go put what's left of the birdseed out for them and when I get back, I want you both to let me know what you need from the store." He knew the drill as that had often been a tactic his parents had used on him to give them an opportunity to consider choices. They were down to their last remaining cup of sunflower seeds. Ace often filled the feeders with the help of a step ladder to reach the branches in the trees above. It was always a thrill to watch the birds and his father had taught him much about the simple enjoyment of knowing the many species attracted to their back yard nature of wonders. It took only a couple of minutes and that would be one item off his list. His concern was this was those were the last seeds to share and he would need to find a way to get more in the future.

He walked back inside the house expecting answers to what his parents needed for grocery items. The two were going through the refrigerator bickering about what each wanted and complaining about the things the other wanted instead. There seemed to be a need for compromised resolution and Ace would need to step forward to become the peacekeeper.

"I can only carry so much on my bike, so we're going to need to make a few concessions to what is most important." He was laying the ground rules for them to work together and agree on certain details. It was sibling rivalry amongst his parents that now squabbled over the least important things. Ultimately, he had them each pick one item from the most desired to the next. "You each get to pick five things I can carry."

"Beer!" That's all I need, son. Just bring me back one of those Sam Adams variety packs and I'm good with that." His father did enjoy some of the finer brews.

"Cigarettes!" His mom must have found a new excuse as she had not smoked in years. Both parents had not only shrunken to half their mature size, but apparently their minds had returned to those gratifications from childish rebellions.

"First off, I am too young to buy either of those products and until you start acting your age again, we will need to be more practical about priorities." Ace had realized he was now in charge of their well being as the witch's curse had literally given him control over his parents. Although he now enjoyed being as tall and more fit than his altered household kin, the challenges and responsibilities seemed much more demanding now than when he could simply be a kid.

Gidget had picked up on the radical differences of changes in the new alpha leadership. She seemed to have more intellectual capacity than any of them. The dog also understood other senses in which humans are unaware. Nasal scents most of the animal kingdom have the capacity to determine the mood, agenda and the very nature of others. A nose used as a neural gauge to depict emotional response. Pets often pick up on the slightest changes within their human counterparts. Size doesn't matter when it comes to intellectual capacity.

Ace finally created a list of necessities that could be easily be carried in his backpack on his bike. Gidget took special interest in Jules clothing. Sniffing up and down and round and around, there was something very peculiar and new to their home. The dog glanced around the sitting room. The family used it rather infrequently and only to entertain those rare guests that would come to visit for consultation. Gidget had been disciplined and trained to keep off the exotic sofa and chairs, but the smell seemed to be coming from that direction.

The dog poked her nose underneath the sofa while Ace finalized his list of items. A sudden stir as something moved from it's hiding place. A cat! Gidget gave chase.

Jules shrieked, "That's Ally, my new cat!" Gidget cornered it, yet the feline cat made a leap upwards along the china cabinet that displayed all the finest dishes the family had received from their wedding many years ago.

His mother quickly ran through the room to save both the cat and her tableware. Ace leapt over the coffee table barely catching an entire set of china dishes before it crashed upon the Persian rug. The black cat continued to scurry through the cabinet while tossing more glass and silverware about. A vintage coffee mug met it's demise and splintered into pieces.

"Gidget! Go lay down, girl! GO!" Ace commanded his mixed breed dog to stop barking and ease the tension in the home. The dog's resolve was quite the contrast to the black cat with fearful green eyes. Gidget's tail snuck underneath it's body with ears closed slumping downwards upon her head. A quick "Woof!" was all she could manage to complain about the intruder.

Ace finally opened up one of the glass openings to allow the cat to escape. "Ally?" He looked at his mother with sudden consternation. She was never one to take much interest in pets and it had been a miracle to allow her son to keep a dog for his own.

Gidget had been passed along after the death of his grandmother...rest her soul. As an only child, Ace needed companionship and the dog was both loving and loyal. She gave him both confidence and a distraction against hidden fears. With that, the boy understood his mother's need for something to comfort her.

"Mom, are you certain you want this cat?" It was a similar sermon the boy had heard just a few years ago.

"It's gonna be Mine!" She responded. The black cat purred as it closed in around her wavering it's tail across her leg. Jules picked Alley off the ground to hold the cat closer just before the animal stuck her claws into the flesh with stinging pain and the scratches to prove it.

"That's going to be my decision to make and not yours, mom." Ace wasn't against another pet in the home, but wanted his mom to prove she was ready. "Now, we're all familiar with 'responsibility' and so you can keep the cat, but you are going to need to take care of it or I will take it to the shelter." It was a double-edged sword philosophy in that the cat would provide interest for his mom and help keep her away from more damaged trouble with his father.

Frank appeared immature watching the entire scene with the dog chasing the cat while laughing throughout the

damages. Rather than helping to restore order, he simply sat in his own chair criticizing others' actions without alluding to his own lack of effort. He now seemed particularly annoyed that his wife had gained a pet without his knowledge and demanded he gain something in return as well.

"What is it you want, dad?" Ace pushed his own agenda to discover if there may be something of a nature that would provide equality for both parents. That had his father thinking through a list of items that he desired. "You know what, dad...let's get back to that as it's getting late and I need to get the things we each need before it gets too dark for me to see."

The boy was learning on a molecular level the quantum physics of handling both his parents childlike minds. Ace wasn't sure what that meant, but he had heard those words before and it became a soundboard of intellect implicated in a world of allusions.

With new ground rules in place and a determined purpose, Ace demanded the new cat remain in his parents room for the time being as Gidget would need an adjustment period before pet issues turned into further damage. Ace promised to keep his dog in her crate for now

until he returned. One last verification of the list and Ace grabbed his empty backpack. He walked out the side garage door and jumped on his bike with a purpose. He was turning into his own parents.



Chapter Thirteen: Laughter in the Woods

"I guess I'll need some kitty litter now that mom has a new cat." Ace was thinking ahead as he took great care in the sharp turn around the bend as the concrete path could easily lead him into the lake. Many cars had to be pulled from the water's edge as it was a road less traveled and a shortcut to the store. Once beyond the dangerous curve, the road plained with a scenic view of the countryside and the purple mountains in the distance against an orange veil of clouds reflecting the magnificent sunshine.

"So beautiful!" Ace always enjoyed his biking escapes to just explore and breathe in the fresh air. He was perhaps thinking that was the reason he suggested duty for himself instead of another excuse for something he could not achieve.

"I CAN'T NEVER COULD!" He could hear his father lecturing him now as he was often reminding his son to try his best at anything that could be possible and not to allow deceptive spirits nor excuses to manage a limited comfort zone. It was always good advice and had given the boy confidence to stand on the mound to pitch. Those words were as important to Little League athletes as much as the game of life and helped prove a slogan for simply putting oneself in a position to overcome the many challenges each face amidst their own fears.

Ace had put on his cushioned biker shorts and sleek-trimmed black shirt that was made with a fiber that didn't soak in too much sweat. His passion for action, creativity and exploring new opportunities were central to his soul's ambitions. The ride would soon take him to the bridge that crossed and then down into the woods to cut through the merchandising town near Little River's outer edge. It was not the closest convenience store, but carried a larger selection of products. His mind was multitasking through the many new challenges he faced while trying to stay focused on one thing at a time.

There was the bridge he would cross that led through the woods. Ace noticed another biker at the other end. It was "The Dude!" His pitching teammate was also outdoors on his bike. This gave him hope as some new element of opportunity flashed an idea in his brilliant mind. Perhaps the two could ride together.

"Hey, Dude!" Ace greeted his teammate with a high five hand slap. "What brings you out this way?" The question seemed natural. it was also a clever tactic to find out if the other kid had any pressing business. There could be a chance companion to help him ride to the store. "You live around here?"

"Dad's got a cabin not far and likes to come out on weekends to get away. I'm just killin' time exploring the woods on my mountain bike." He explained. "I like being 'the dude' on the team. It's almost as cool a name as 'Ace.'" They both shared their cool factors amongst themselves in bonding.

"Dad says we've gotta good chance to be League Champs" Ace provided insight into his father's managerial opinions. He wasn't certain if he should share the recent changes with either of his parents. so pretended he was just out running a few errands for them to do a little exploring on his own.

"Say, you wanna bike back through the woods with me?" Ace knew the perfect pitch to throw in life as in baseball and put an expressive appeal on his cutter right down the middle of the plate. "I may get a few things in town and thought you might make the run with me." Ace was showing big league talent already convincing friends with his own motivational management. He had learned much watching his father and it now seemed to be paying off. "Practice makes Perfect" was another expression that had stuck in the boy's imaginative mind.

"Race you there!" was the overwhelming challenge as the two boys quickly made their way across the remaining bridge to cut through the park and into the woods. It was a thrill ride for both as they winded their way down the dirt path trails. Leaves on trees waved with the sudden burst of wind from their passing. The green canopy overhead blocked much of the sunlight as they fled deeper into the dark forest.

Ace knew it was still mid-afternoon, but time stops for no one and the ride seemed more urgent than before to get what he needed with plenty of time to return home. He had taken these paths on many occasions knowing them well and his endurance allowed him to finally catch up to 'the dude.' Now Ace was in the lead. One more hill to climb and it would be a downhill race to the finish. He was sure to win.

Just over the top before he could set his sights below a tree had fallen. Ace smashed his tire, crippling his bike tire and went flying off the handle into a row of bushes. He was quick to recover and shouted warning as loud as he could to his friend just about to make the same mistake.

"Dude! *WATCH OUT!* Fallen Tree!" Just in time as the boy heard the unexpected shouting to notice the barrier between himself and victory. The boy stopped his bike twisting sideways the very moment before his force had an impact against the fallen tree lying full length across the path. Sweat broke as if liquid glory had answered some split second prayer.

"You OK?" The dude asked as he couldn't see his friend in the bushes, but had noticed the damage to the bike he was riding. "Where are you?"

Ace made his way from the cushioned hedges and stumbled back onto the path. "I'll be fine" he wasn't for

certain as he examined the numerous scratches underneath his ripped biking uniform. The dude was thankful for the warning and offered him a rescue plan.

"Say, it's not too far to my dad's cabin and he's got a four-wheeler." That would certainly expedite the plan and even provide a faster means of transportation to carry a few more supplies and goods Ace's parents wished for him to bring. "Too bad about your bike though. Maybe we can come back and pick it up later."

"Sounds like a plan." Ace was equally grateful.

"Sure, I'm game. Just be glad I was the one who took the lead 'cause I had you beat by a mile." Only competition can bring out boys' egotistical inner confidence and 'the dudes' punch to his friend's shoulder was more to show respect than add to his own insult. "Easy now...I've been injured."

Much of the new plan went just as expected as Ace suddenly realized his day was not as expected. They had made the trip to Trey's cabin and the father reluctantly allowed the boys to use it as long as they remained safely off road and avoided any traffic. They purchased the goods with the money Ace's parents had given him. There was enough to get a six pack of beer and cigarettes as well as they conned an adult to enter with an added tip for his

effort. It was a blessing to Ace for his new found friend and confide in him about the weird circumstances surrounding his parents transformation.

The two were headed back through the dark forest and as they came to the point where the crash had occurred, they decided to find a path around as there was no way to get past the fallen tree. A few breaks in the larger trees provided just enough passage to squeak through and topple the forest's new growing things.

The trees seemed to close in and became impossible to pass with their four-wheeling machine with all their goods. The two boys could not turn around with the heavy machine in it's position and began to quickly calculate their chances of making it out of the forest alive.

They heard laughter in the trees.

The laughter was a bass-filled bellowing from inner earth down to the roots of something that existed long before man. Much too dark to see clearly, both boys became frightened as the woods had voices. They were uncertain from which it came, but there was no doubt their ears understood the trees of the dark forest had some message for them.

"SO! You want to tear down the forest with your machines of industry!" The voice was loud and clear and not so much a question as it were commentary on their passage. There was much to nature misunderstood and the voice turned to some sermon about mankind's disrespect for growing things. "How DARE the two of you run willy-nilly over our children. We have given BIRTH to new generations of trees that will live lifetimes upon this earth and provide the oxygen in the air in which you breath!"

Both the boys were freakish with fear. They became trapped between the world of nature and disbelief. The only escape would be some atonement for barreling over small trees that appeared to be the only course of action to find their way through the dark forest.

Ace then recognized the white owl flying past him as it stretched it's wings wide and landed upon a large limb in another oak tree. "It must be the same owl." Ace thought to himself. The bird of wisdom gazed down upon him as he could see only his reflection deep within those large golden eyes. His friend seemed in a trance of his own. The dude simply gazed expressionless as if he could not see the forest for the trees.

The large tree then moved from it's position in the dark forest. Closer it crept forward standing just before the two boys. The moonlight broke through as it cleared to reveal an old man's face sculpted upon the bark texture within. The thick layers shifted and the tree spoke.

"Respect all that is living...even in nature."

Ace felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. His revenge on his parents had backfired as they were only teaching him to learn responsibility. The parent curse had also woken deep-rooted spirits of nature. It was wrong to use dark magic.

"Magic and witchcraft are deceptive devices not to be taken lightly. The allure of those who do not understand the spirits within the roots of all being create chaos and destruction in the world."

"I don't understand." Ace knew there were far too many questions to be answered as the oak tree gave sermon.

"You are much too young to understand!" The face within the tree turned concerned about the fate of the boy. "In time, you will learn to be more patient and not hasty with your actions and not meddle in the affairs of dark

magic. Let nature take it's course." With that the tree backed away and opened a path for the boys to take leave.

"Weird, huh?" Ace then began to help the dude push the four-wheeler back to the path through the woods. "I mean, did you understand or believe any of that from the talking tree?"

"Any of what?" The dude asked as if oblivious to anything other than stuck in the woods. "Talking tree? I didn't hear anything." He cranked up the motor and the boys were again on their way.

Passing through the forest into the countryside, they followed the sun's descent towards the West. Ace was confused as he was sure the moon had stolen the day already and his friend was unaware of what had occurred moments before. Could the mystic oak tree have it's own power with spiritual energy in which only Ace could hear?



Chapter Fourteen: The Magic Castle

It all now seemed too much like a fantasy driving
Ace to insanity. He was no longer certain what was real and
what was part of his own imagination. He was sure the tree
had spoken as he was convinced words of wisdom had
come from within the dark forest. Just when he was gaining
more confidence with responsibilities for his childlike
parents, Ace knew there was still so much more to do.

The dude dropped Ace off at his teammates parent's home and quickly got back on the road to see his own. Another high-five with gratitude showed the respect each had for their friendship. At least that was part of reality in Ace's mind. He never felt alone in the world with his imagination, but it was good to make friends.

Gidget was thrilled to have Ace back as the boy had a few dog treats for good behavior. He fed her and checked

in on his parents. His father was watching cartoons on television while his mom was curled up in bed with the new cat. Nothing else seemed out of place inside the home and they were thrilled to have the items they had requested.

"There's some cat food and I even bought some kitty litter for Alley." Ace pointed to the bag. "There's a few plastic containers in storage we can use to fill them for our new pet. The child turned parent was expecting words of gratitude for thinking about the cat's new home and it's needs. He was surprised with his parent's reaction.

"I'm not cleaning any cat droppings!" His mom seemed adamant and above the task. "You do it!" Another childish retort now had Ace on the defense.

"We had that discussion earlier about responsibility." He argued. "If you are going to bring a pet in the house for yourself without asking others, it becomes YOUR duty to take care of ALL it's needs." After much bickering, stomping and other inappropriate behavior, Ace felt drained mentally and finally shouted orders for the two to go to bed and not make another noise.

"I wanna watch cartoons and I haven't done anything wrong!" His father began a new argument that Ace needed to resolve immediately.

"No television, lights out, and get some sleep! We are going on a trip in the morning and you will need all the rest you can get." Ace knew it would be a challenge to get his parents to cooperate and it was imperative they prepared for the journey.

"Where are we going?" Both parents asked simultaneously as if finally of the same mind. Without explaining any details, Ace thought it best to leave them guessing as that would give them much curiosity and distract them both with looking forward to tomorrow rather than their current antics.

Ace was up early the next morning cooking bacon and eggs with toast. He fell to sleep last night immediately as his head hit the pillow. Each day had seemed more adventurous than the previous with all his new responsibilities taking care of his childlike parents. There was only one thing to do. Take them to the Magic Castle in the Enchanted Kingdom high atop the Mystical Mountains. The Wizard could work his magic to change his parents

back to normal simply with a wave of his staff. That would solve the boy's current predicament. He wanted more than anything for everything to return to how things were before. He had learned his lesson and understood his mistakes and realizing responsibility meant admitting or owning up to your own faults.

His parents complained about the eggs not as good as what his mom made, the toast burnt and the bacon too greasy. "I always mix the eggs with a pinch of salt and pepper and sometimes a little Italian seasoning. You always dry out the bacon on paper bags and make sure you keep an eye on the oven so the bread doesn't burn." Her advice was noted as the boy had clearly never paid that much attention to his mom's culinary skills. He knew there would be a learning curve, but at least breakfast was served and the family could hop on the bus to take them past a few towns until they reach the mountain range. A train rail would take them past the castle and they would be there in no time.

His parents seemed excited to finally get out of the house. The bus was the only means of transportation and they became preoccupied with the sights. Surrounding landmarks would often bring conversations between them as a flood of memories were bringing back the past. It

became clear the two spent time together in their own youth and remembered so much joy and wonder. It gave Ace hope that they would be in a positive frame of mind for the wandering wizard to perform to full potential.

They made the railroad train just in time for it's next departure. Apparently, the line had much historical context as the trains had been a strength to the economy and now rebuilt to working order. It was now one of the popular attractions as visitors enjoyed the scenic ride through and around the mountains.

The train led them up to the top of the Mystic Mountains in the Enchanted Kingdom where they made the stop at the famed Magic Castle. Even in his wildest fantasies, Ace never imagined such a place existed. It was an impressive site filled with industrial architecture and a vast tropical garden paradise. Exotic birds could be seen flying all around while dragons could be seen breathing fire from a distance.

His parents were overwhelmed as well as the family found the administration office for the School for Wizards, Warlocks and Sorcery. Ace explained he and his parents were taking part in one of the students final council tests. The boy crossed his fingers believing this would finally end with all that he knew had been wrong.

The administrative assistant asked in specific the name of the wizard student they were seeking. She seemed very polite as she was already prepared to find the necessary documents.

"Virgil, the wizard." Ace answered.

"Oh, dear." She responded with some sense of concern. "Are you certain you want to go through with this?" She was looking over the objective as her mouth turned crooked with doubt.

"Of course," Ace felt hopeful. "He saved me in the mountains against the ogre and said he could reverse the curse on my parents. That's why we are here." The woman peered over the counter to see his parents at half their normal size.

"Let me just confirm the council has approved the performance test." The administrative assistant wanted to be sure that everything was in order as the school often had strict guidelines for their wizards. "This will only take a minute, so please be seated while I speak with the council."

The sudden passing of time waiting in the lounge led to the boy's parents curiosity. They assumed they were

there to enjoy the amusement park, ride the rides and have a fun-filled day of entertainment. They picked up on other intentions and began asking questions.

"Why are we here?" Frank demanded to know. "What's all this talk about a council? Sounds like you brought us here for other reasons." His father could see through the deception and continued to grumble to get some answers.

"I found a wizard that's gonna turn you both back into my real parents." Ace admitted. There was no point to conceal his intentions at this stage. Besides, it was a last resort to fix the issues at hand through magic.

"Oh, sure...when a wizard farts, a dove gets his wings, son!" Frank always had a sarcastic drive to insult his son on occasion

"I don't wanna go back to before." His mother became testy with the decision. "I'd rather YOU do all the work around the house. I'm tired of multi tasking for the two of you." Jules had a point in that she was the backbone of their family structure and was enjoying a life with less responsibility.

The argument and opinions were valid, yet Ace knew magic was the only means to rectify the situation. It

wasn't fair to him either to suddenly become their guardians. A lesson he learned the hard way, but had to be resolved. He did his best to reassure them it was all going to work out in the end.

The administrative assistant suddenly appeared with a tall elderly man with a long white beard wearing a wizard dress robe and carrying a tall staff. It was not Virgil, but one of the council propers that would sit in judgement of the performance final. He took Ace to the side to ask a few questions before he made a decision to proceed with what he found an unusual test for a four-star wizard.

Ace wasn't expecting so much resistance from those of authority, but reminded the council judge that his parents presented an unusual case and Virgil seemed confident in his craftwork of wizard magic. It was a last resort, but necessary. The council judge signed the paperwork and led the boy and his parents down the majestic main hall through more gates that led to a large courtyard with a golden amphitheater. The stage was magnificent with beautiful gardens on each side filled with many magic herbs and exotic flowers. Royal Purple curtains were drawn as a backdrop containing the school's symbolic logo for their high standards of magic.

There was a semicircular row of throne-type chairs in the back where Ace noticed a number of similar council judges began to walk in synchronic motion from each side to take their seat in the high seats. After a few processional activities and fireworks, Virgil appeared center stage in a puff of smoke to address the council judges.

"Council Judge Propers and all in attendance...I am Virgil the Wizard." He sounded confident as he spoke with such authority to the many students in the crowded amphitheater. "I welcome you to an extraordinary challenge and one that may set the bar for Wizard excellence!"

Ace was stage left as an usher asked the boy's parents to advance to center stage alongside Virgil. A few more fireworks sparkled in sequence to reveal a genetic code while bright lights ran through the color spectrum upon more smoke just behind the performing wizard. There was an illusion of a prism that formed from triangular directions and cast the lights into a rainbow that reflected upon the crowd.

The performance and transformation was about to begin and Ace had never felt more proud of his efforts through all the adversity of the challenges he faced and the lessons learned. This was it! His problems would be solved! The lights reflected the hope and happiness for his future and return his parents to normal adults.

"Ladies and Gentleman...Let us release these parents from the dark magic of those with lesser wisdom and restore the truth of presence. Let the Show begin!"



Chapter Fifteen: Wizard Magic

Another blast of fireworks as Virgil held his staff high in the air. No doubt this would be the performance of a lifetime...Ace wanted everything to return to a natural state and continue with his own childhood not having to bear what had become a burden for him to be responsible for his parents. As an ambitious Little Leaguer who dreamed of pitching in the Major Leagues, he now understood the values of those with intentions to help him through life's challenges to new levels of maturity. Practice, persistence, and being responsible for your own mistakes were now clear in the boy's mind. Perhaps the curse was a blessing in disguise as this wizard's performance could change things with new perspective from both the boy's attitude and his parent's understanding. Ace was excited to have a backstage pass to the show's conclusive effort.

"Boy, Virgil's laying it on thick with his performance!" Ace overheard one of the production workers speaking to another. "If only the flunky wizard knew magic! He's a good representative for the school and I guess these clowns bought the sales pitch!"

Suddenly Ace was confused. His confidence was shaken. Overhearing the comments from strangers he never met put new perspective on what was happening. He was not in position to question others' opinions, but disturbed by the conversation that continued.

Virgil raised his staff high into the air. Lightning struck from unknown spiritual forces as the wizard's focus turned the atmosphere into some abstract element of consciousness

"Abracadabra, Malakazam...Parentus Amphibius! Calamity Wham!" There was a sudden flash of light after the wizard brought on the magic spell.

The crowd stood silent. The parents had been transformed into toads. It wasn't clear which was male or female, but one suddenly leaped along the stage to where the exotic flowers were in bloom and landed on a lily pad

in the water basin. It suddenly shot out it's tongue a great distance to catch a wandering insect.

"Did you just eat a fly?" The other toad, presumably Ace's mother made a few leaps towards the edge of the stage for further evaluation. "How disgusting, Frank!"

"Don't knock 'em 'til you try 'em" was the response from the other toad.

Jules, now in toad form took a leap into the flowering garden and managed to catch a mosquito with her own tongue. "Insects do have a certain appeal, I must admit."

"Oh, dear!" Virgil the wizard expressed with much embarrassment. Something had gone terribly wrong with his magic spell to transform the parents. He had turned them into amphibious toads. "Not to worry," he assured all those in attendance. "This is all a process in a sequential transformation of images. Let me try this again to bring forth the evolution of life."

With that being said, the council judges stared at one another for approval to continue. The High Priest and Master Wizard gave his blessing to allow the performance to continue as there was no choice but to allow Virgil to rectify his skills in magic. He motioned to the production

team to capture the toad parents and bring them back to center stage for another attempt.

Ace was dumbfounded seeing his parents as toads. The boy was not as certain as before this was a good idea. Wizard magic seemed to be a sound solution to transform his parents back to themselves, but he was not expecting this as a result. Obviously, something else had to be done as this was now worse than before. He nodded his approval for the performance to continue in hopes the student wizard would finally earn his fifth star of Wizardry Magic to earn his degree.

The stage was set again with more smoke, flames and fireworks that added excitement to the show. The crowd applauded for a new act that inspired another attemp at inner ambitions through magic. A concert of wizardry endorsed more smoke in a mystic veil within the Magic Castle of the Enchanted Kingdom.

"Praegressus Perfectio! Regressus Mundus! Cultura Humanitatus!"

As the smoke finally began to rise, Virgil the wizard lowered his staff. Lightning struck again from a spiritual energy only those who knew magic understood. The crowd was on the edge of their seats to see the transformation.

Many coughed through the smoke-filled air to catch their breath until it was taken away by what they now were witnessing.

The two transformed figures were now apes. Hairy creatures that resembled their expressive qualities with facial recognition, yet not quite human. Another failed attempt to return them beyond the barriers of evolution's distant past.

Laughter broke the silence as the student crowd turned their surprise into thinking this was a performance to showcase wizard humor. A comedy of magic proportions mocking the great expectations of human development.

Virgil's head sank deep into his finely sewn purple gown as he had gone from a four star wizard to the laughing stock of wizard academics. He was sure he could reverse the curse with confidence as his studies had proven achievements throughout his years of residency. His own confidence was now shaken, but he was not giving up on himself.

The proper council judges assembled amongst themselves to determine if this should continue along the course restrictions. It was their decision to either minimize further damages or allow Virgil one last attempt. Most wizard scholars get a second chance to prove themselves with a second performance act, but doubt had turned into a ridiculous affair of consideration. One final act turning magic into nothing less than a tool for mockery could spin the world of wizards to nothing more than foolish men without truth of power. The lengthy debate amongst the council lasted for what seemed an eternity.

"The Third Times The Charm!" Shouted Virgil at last having thought the matter through to the end. He took center stage again after consulting with Ace backstage. He had made a promise to bring his parents back and the light in the boy's eyes showed him promising results. There was determination from all parties involved to overcome the lack of properties within magic as Ace spoke to Virgil about nature taking it's course. Confidence was key to ambition and both were looking to find the right path and spell that would bring his parents back to themselves.

Virgil ushered Ace to come out with him to stand center stage. "This young man came into my presence with the hope to return his parents from a curse that disrupted the balance of nature. It is our chance as wizards to show how magic works miracles and the persistence of ambition leads to happiness."

The council judges turned to each other to gain a sense of their decision. The narrative sounded optimistic and there was much truth to Virgil's account for attempting something miraculous. A third chance could not be denied.

The High Priest of the Council finally gave the consent for Virgil to have a third attempt to return the young boy's ape parents back to their original condition in life. It would take a miracle as transformations were such a difficult spell and no other wizard had ever reversed a curse from witchcraft. The scholar wizard had altered the boy's parents through magic, yet had not mastered the desired intentions.

"Stand back, Ace" Virgil ushered the young boy to the back of the stage. "This spell may affect you as well and I don't want you near to suffer the consequence." Ace took his leave and even departed from the stage to a distance where he could believe in such a miracle that would bring his parents back to themselves. His hopes and dreams were intertwined with family values and all he really wanted was a chance to return to how it all was before the curse.

Virgil stood center stage focused on the transformation of the boy's parents. Turning them back into

their own identity was a challenge through magic that required all the knowledge and experience he could bring forth through sacrifice of his own. It would be his final performance act to achieve his fifth star in Wizard supremacy. He simply could not fail in his promise.

Throughout the amphitheater amongst the student crowd and the council judges watching with anticipation, Virgil held his staff high as lightning emulated the spiritual force of nature. Confidence in success was key and the goal would be a final analysis of miraculous proportions to bring life back and restore the boy's parents to their stature. Winds of change passed through as the scene brought holographic images of the changing seasons. All in attendance felt the harsh summer bearing the heat with the sun bearing rays of glory. The crowd began to sweat. There was a transition to an illusion of natures color palette filled with warm hues vibrant to autumn's decor. Snow began to fall from the sky replacing the brilliance with a cold chill. The white wilderness and empty forest landscape suddenly bloomed again with a sudden burst of greenery filled with a new energy of thriving flowers containing all the colors available in nature. A rainbow appeared above as the crowd gasped in awe of the spectacular performance.

"Senioribus reverentia...Unitas, caritas, Veritas vitae magistra...Amor vincit omnia!"

The wizard's spell cast an ominous contrast throughout the courtyard. The sky clouded with darkness as night suddenly took void of all the colors from the universe until stars began to appear and bring light to the world. The slow illumination brightened to provide new focus and vision upon the center stage. For moments on end the crowded gathering waited to see the results as the stars continued to shine brighter.

Ace had been watching as well from backstage. His eyes were closed with hopes and prayers throughout the performance. He finally opened his eyes as the lights from the stars showed more brilliance. He saw his parents in human form

The crowd gasped. The council judges quickly assembled. There was much confusion throughout the amphitheater. It wasn't clear what effects had occurred as most were in disbelief. The boy's parents stood together clutching each other with loving conviction, yet had aged many years as senior citizens desperately clinging to life. The couple had been taken into their own future. They cringed over the wizard on the floor of the stage. His body

was lifeless. The wizard had cast a spell to sacrifice himself for the boy's wishes.

None knew the consequences of the actions. The council judges were in a state of confusion. It was clear the performance had returned the boy's parents to humanity at a much older age, but the sacrificial death of their student seemed extreme in his determination to succeed. An apology would need to be made to the family on behalf of the wizards.

After much consultation and verification that Virgil was indeed dead, the High Priest confronted the boy. "I cannot imagine the pain you are feeling." There was a deep sympathy and compassion from the man who took it upon himself to provide comfort in both their losses. He wasn't sure if magic could resolve the boy's needs. It was as is all things in life that the world evolves and finds the ways and means of truth. The magic of wizards were keen on wisdom, but no longer a dominant force in a world that no longer believed.

Ace looked at his parents. They were old. Too aged in years and he turned to the High Priest without knowing what to say. His fate was beyond the help of others. "What can I do to help? I am just a child. It seems impossible for

me to provide the means for my parents to live a long and healthy life. They are sure to die if I don't come up with a plan where I can help them!"

The High Priest of the council took a deep breath as he considered an answer to the boy's question. He knew the nature of all things considered and understood how the youth had an impact on development. It would be a treacherous voyage that only a childish boy could accomplish with the given knowledge he could compress within a small frame of experience. It was a risk as much as Virgil's performance and could lead to death. The High Priest looked again into the boy's eyes to see what ambitious nature he had to resolve his love for his parents.

"Do you have faith?" He asked of the boy. The question would determine the answer.

"What do you mean?" Ace answered before he had a chance to consider.

"There is only one authority above magic and that is something that comes from beyond what wizards control. Faith is belief from within yourself to do what you feel is necessary for yourself and others. I sense a strength in you that I've not seen in other children that has more passion in life and I believe that you are ambitious enough to see this

through to the end." The High Priest seemed resilient in his confession that there may be another solution to the curse.

Virgil the wizard suddenly appeared through a mist of illusion. The chemical compounds of elements broke through some fantastic force and the magic had returned to provide another course of action. "Ace, you must go to the edge of the world to save your parents." The wizard's image faded in and out as he described the details and the only thing the boy could make out was "Pumpkin King" as if that had any relevant meaning. Virgil soon faded as if magic no longer existed as Ace came back to reality.



Chapter Sixteen: The Lost Years

Virgil's image continued to fade in and out of reality through the mist of time. The wizard's special effects had been impressive throughout his residency at the school for magic. None better than he could refract light through holographic illusions to turn chemical and elemental properties so realistic within the minds of subjects. As with any given talent, that had been one that was most impressive and Virgil used that one strength to overcome his weaknesses.

"Ace!" The foolish wizard came more in focus with his identity as his talking head grew to gigantic proportions speaking on high within the clouds to both the young boy and the High Priest. "In death, I have now seen the light! I know now what you must do to turn back time to that moment in which you lost your way."

Virgil sounded excited for a wizard who just moments ago lay on the performance stage dead amidst the crowd of students and Proper Council Judges. No wizard magic had ability to restore life, but there were options to consider as his parents were still living. He wanted to share the knowledge he gained in afterlife to help return the boy's childhood ambitions and reverse the curse.

The High Priest looked on with skepticism thinking this was simply fallout from the spell cast for the performance. He did not believe so much in illusions and the refraction of light to distort reality. Those wizard gifts were exceptional to those with lesser minds more willing to accept the deceptive truth.

Virgil continued despite the unbelieving expression on the High Priest's face. "Ace, you must go the edge of the universe to seek the Pumpkin King. Only the fruit-bearing master of living growth can restore order from chaos."

Virgil's proposal was outlandish as the High Priest explained, "It's just a myth, my boy. There was a time when pumpkins were a symbol of the most sacred night between the living and the dead. Those customs and traditions took new directions with no more than spooky

tales to frighten children about a great pumpkin to devour those disobedient and disrespectful to their parents and guardians. I don't believe in such an entity as it is too farfetched for reality. There is no proof nor evidence to support such an outlandish presence and I think this idea is just chasing a fantastic dream.

Ace was confused. Two wizards bickering over tall tales. What was reality and what was more important was the truth? Did the High Priest not put faith forward with what to believe? Ace had witnessed the power of wizard magic with his own eyes. Perhaps Virgil had not mastered the discipline of casting spells to alter others, but at least he was one to take the risks as he had shown nothing but compassion and truly wanted to succeed with his ambition in restoring his own parents. He sacrificed his own life and willing to provide more direction from a distant place in the heavens.

"Did you not ask if I had faith and if I believed?"

Ace felt something within his own heart that was far more convincing than the holographic image of Virgil in the clouds. The question was a tactic measure to challenge the High Priest. The boy knew nothing of magic, but understood the elements that drove his own ambitions. The

questions he had were often driven by the natural tendencies to understand the foundation of life's complexities. The patterns of agenda were inconsistent with wisdom and the boy just wanted clarification.

"The world is a complex institution of affairs. It isn't always a simple matter of knowledge." The High Priest was doing his best to find another solution to the young boy's challenge. "I understand the question better than you know, yet it is only you who can make decisions for yourself. I value your beliefs as much as my own and so if there is anything I can do to help...I will help provide what is needed."

With that, Ace considered his options. There was really only one that inspired his inner soul. Go to the edge of the universe and find the Pumpkin King. After all, it isn't so much the final destination as much as the journey and Virgil appeared to have an answer. Was he truly dead or was this all part of wizard magic for some unknown agenda? It was a difficult choice either way.

"My parents are very old. They are going to die soon. I must do something." Ace desperately sought more than words could be spoken. He needed action. The young boy who wanted nothing more than to throw his ball against the concrete wall of his parent's house again and to feel like a child with dreams had been thrust into a world that had turned upside down. Now was the time to put forth his best interests at heart and the High Priest somehow believed in the boy's spirit. He was a man of faith.

"Let us take leave of this place and I will show you the way. The edge of the universe is beyond the realm of magic and that is why wizards have so little understanding of such other forces that are hidden. Only those true of heart can enter and I do 'believe' you may be the one chosen for this opportunity to discover hidden secrets man has never acknowledged. It will be your own decision to risk the fate that has now been proposed."

That was enough for Ace to find confidence within himself as the High Priest went on about specifics and how the road ahead would be a challenge for him to discover more within himself. The boy welcomed the chance to understand more about the world and to take it to the edge of the universe. He was young and had so much to learn knowing his mistakes were now more crucial to reality than what he could imagine.

"I will take on this challenge as I have nothing to lose and hope and pray for the return of my parents as they were before I put the curse on them." His feelings came from the heart as the boy told the truth.

Upon returning to the keep within the Magic Castle walls, the High priest ordered a special feast in honor of their new adventurer. "This boy will go beyond what is known to us and hopefully discover hidden truths about life's existence. Our elders have become less knowledgable about nature's existence and for too long, we have ignored those things that bring changes and it is time for us to take notice and realize the differences between generations of evolution."

The exquisite meal contained all the typical traditions of a magical feast. Roast Beast, Griffon legs, existential soup along with breaded transcendence. The finest wines and ciders had also been lifted from the Magic Kingdom's cellar stock. Opportunity for light conversation broke the silence as others became informed of the young boy's next phase to recover those lost years missed as his parents had suddenly been transformed to a much older age.

"The edge of the universe?" One of the Council elders asked in surprise. There was much debate as the soft tones turned to hard core idealism. Not all agreed on the

abstract calculations, though none had any truth to knowledge about such a daring plan of adventure.

"Ace, the boy will take flight upon Windmere, our most glorious dragon." The High Priest felt confident with his choice decision even as others failed to believe. "To save time and effort, we shall place him in the Black Portal to bend space and time for a shorter distance journey."

"The boy is far too young for such an expedition. Surely there must be another way." Another elder favored a more traditional solution. "What of the boy's parents. They certainly cannot survive nor endure such a perilous journey."

"I believe in Ace." The High Priest defended the young boy. "For he believes in himself and is determined. As for his parents, we will ensure the two are taken back to the comforts of their own home and provided with care. Should the Pumpkin King exist as legends tell, it shall be unto his own powers to provide solutions for reversing the spell cursed upon them."

The Council feast slowly broke away into various quarters as final instructions were delivered to Ace with more specific intent. Once upon the dragon and through the portal gate, there would be no turning back and all the

magic from all the wizards could not penetrate the dimension at the edge of the universe. Ace would be on his own. The High Priest did have one last token to give the boy and set him on his way. An ancient coin that had been passed through what was believed the beginning of time with an engraved octagonal star on one side and a circular pattern with horizontal lines from beginning to end.

"You will need this coin once you get to the edge of the Universe." The High Priest explained to the boy. "When you get there, you must cross the Mystic River by ferry. It is said to be the only means to drift through the two worlds of Reality into Fantasy. The token is proof of purchase for compensation from one world to the next and back again.

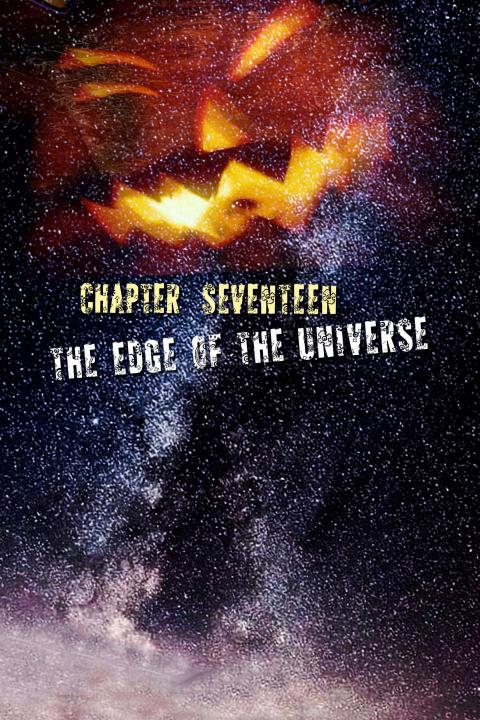
With that, Ace was taken to the mountainous island beyond and strapped to the back of the dragon Windmere upon a special saddle carrier. He would need to hold tight to the reigns around the serpent's neck crossing through the time portal gate and into another dimension of the world. A vortex began to spin with high winds as stars began rushing forth at light speed. Cosmic matter shifted from presence to distant past with a deluge of historical images showing Ace was now in a travel through time. Was he going back in

time? He wondered as even his own memories began to flood his vision. He closed his eyes.

Although still in a state of deep unconsciousness, Ace dropped one of his hands down by his side. He felt something unexpected. It was a new toy that appeared from some cultural and spiritual form of human development. It was the first Christmas he could remember. A green-faced witch scared him through the television. She led an army of monkies that could fly. It all seemed too fantastic in his mind, but he was willing to except anything he saw on tv. There were more childhood memories that popped into the boy's mind as he needed to now focus on the present state of circumstances. What about his own parent's memories? Were they now lost to years in which they never lived?

Left with nothing but curiosity and questions and the determination to discover the truth, Ace was willing to go the distance. He raised his right arm to grapple the reigns attached to the dragon that was leading him to the edge of the universe. Just a simple-minded boy with aspirations of pitching in the Major Leagues had gone through so many innings of life to quit his dream. He wanted more than what his imagination could provide and was willing to give into those desires. He was going to

make amends for his mistake and ain't nobody gonna change his thoughts when he believed so much in himself.



Chapter Seventeen: The Edge of the Universe

The baby blue skies of the Enchanted Kingdom seemed a distant memory while traveling through the portal gate to other dimensions. The truth was it took only a few minutes. The human mind cannot imagine going such a distance and must compensate with a collective memory. Ace finally gained conscious still strapped to Windmere the dragon. The skies were an ominous crimson orange with purple haze spreading as if a smog-filled industrial waste. The dragon followed a river from a safe distance as the heat from this fantasy world was built with dragon fire. Volcanoes spread as far as the boy could see through the dense fog. With a great flap of it's wings, Windmere turned and began to land within a large stone structure.

Once an enormous colossal structure from ancient history when dragons were the sport of Kings, the remains

were now only boulders of rubble and cracked concrete. Windmere the Dragon landed in the very center of the arena. Ace was impressed with what remained of the structures man had built long ago and took his time before releasing himself from the dragon's saddle.

He had already been given more specific directions as the dragon could no longer fly over nor cross into the edge of the universe. The origins of creation contain it's own mythical spells in which certain beasts cannot pass between the two worlds.

Ace ensured he had the things needed in crossing the Mystic River. The dragon lowered it's head to the ground and lifted the boy across much of the ancient wreckage to a viaduct that was still passable. It led downwards to a set of stairs at the water's edge. The dock was empty and time was getting late.

"Will I be stuck here forever?" Ace thought to himself. There was a chill in the air and the wind began to stir. He could hear the slow paddling of oars in the distance through the thickening fog. The ferry was approaching the dock The boat slowly made a shift in direction to align perpendicular to the dock. The figure was hooded with a torn black gown. His face seemed rotted as if Death had taken him hundreds of years earlier. He stuck out his boned hand to collect his fee. Ace knew he was as close to death as anyone could be.

The boy reached into his pocket to find the ancient coin the High Priest had given him for payment to cross the ferry to enter the edge of the universe. Death's dominion clutched the token tight and motioned for the boy to enter. Ace sat upon an old wooden boarding seat in the back. The course structure felt it would give way at any moment. The mystic figure clutched the oars turning the ferry around rowing back through the fog along the Mystic River.

The passage through the water up the river was slow and appeared it may take an eternity to reach their destination. The mist and fog penetrated the boy's mind, putting him in a trance. A dreamscape in which his mind lost sense of presence wondering what was happening back home in his own world.

"I wonder where they are now?" The High Priest had made a promise to see his mother and father back in the comforts of their own home with others to take care of their elderly needs. Time had been a theme to the Parent Curse as the witch in the Dark Forest turned the two into children themselves. Much had happened since through the adventure to reverse the curse and return to the way things were before.

Ace could think of nothing else than pitching against his parents concrete wall. His imagination could run free with those dreams of pitching in the Major Leagues. Practice makes perfect and he needed all he could get before his time to mature and learn more about the game. His teammates had turned to friendships as a result of his missing glove and that may have been one of those silver linings when something tragic becomes a blessing in disguise. Ace wondered what they had been doing since his adventure began. Were they all back on the field of play?

"How much time has been lost" Ace could not keep track of the minutes, hours, and days since all the hocus pocus began. The boy realized he should've left well enough alone the unintentional consequences of his imagination. He remembered the burning desire to take revenge upon his parents and how it backfired through a world of magic. It had been a hard lesson to learn as he ultimately felt the guilt of responsibility.

"It wasn't MY FAULT!" Ace returned to the scene of the crime in his dreamscape where he left his baseball glove in his parents back yard. "Gidget should've know better than to chew up my glove." Feeling unjustified with being grounded may have seemed natural, but the one lesson learned is to take accountability for one's own actions and lack of responsibility.

Now was that time. Ace was determined to make everything like it was before and his last remaining hope was to visit the Pumpkin King to seek help. There was no guarantee as such an entity was non-existent by those who disagreed the nature at the Edge of the Universe. It was a long shot and the last chance for Ace to reverse the curse. The proof of life in the boy's course of action should be evidence of his determination. He was not going to give up until all was lost.

The fog and mist began to clear. The boy's eyes opened to a grim desolate volcanic mountainside in which sparks cast high into the night skies. Death's ferry was making it's way through the lava ever closer to the volcanos in the distance. Ominous silhouettes intimidated everything with a spectacular blazing inferno from the birth

of creation. The heat intensified as Ace was now covering his mouth to avoid smoke inhalation.

He noticed fire-breathing serpents in the Mystic River. One splashed just before the ferry. Death raised his oar for onward passage as the beast raised it's mighty blackened charcoal wings to great heights and flew past as if to warn the giants that could be seen with tridents poking holes in the volcanic mountains. It was all so fantastic, yet Ace's senses knew this was reality.

Still a slow voyage upon the lava, the ferry drifted cautiously. Demonic creatures with swords and spears began to follow along trails to chase the ferry along the river's edge. Ace became frightened. He had never known fear such as this. He was in a flight or fight panic, not knowing the outcome either way.

The Death ferry suddenly began pushing his oar faster and drifted closer to the demonic army of soldiers. Ace could see a tunnel just ahead of their navigation into one of the volcanos. Many of the demons had gathered above the entrance as if to leap from above onto the ferry. Closer the boat approached the dangerous tunnel.

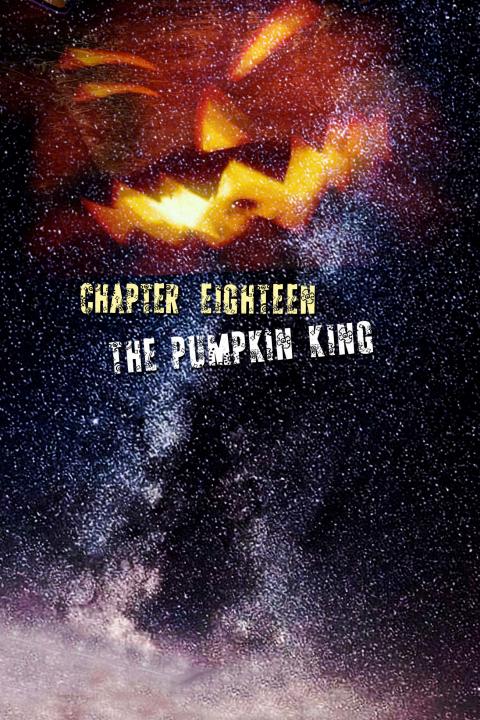
A sudden eruption from above scattered the demons to the side of the volcano's entrance. Lava began to pour

just as the ferry made it's way inside the mountain. Ace could hear the boiling lava take the demons prisoner and drag them into the river. The screams from the burning pain could be heard long after they continued to float through the maze of tributaries leading to the center of the mountain.

Ace could see light open just in front as the ferry made it's way to the other side of the volcano. They drifted through more molten lava as the ferry dodged large rocks on some new path that began to gain speed. The ferry was moving swiftly as the Death's ferryman put his oar into the boat. The boat was now on a set course in which the current would guide them to the end.

"Was this the end?" Ace questioned his own sense of hope. At that moment, the boy noticed a significant change in the Mystic River's horizon. The lava came to a sudden end. The river was moving faster and faster and they began to near with great momentum.

The ferry was headed straight towards falling lava! There was no time to react to certain death!



Chapter Eighteen: The Pumpkin King

The ferry boat tipped over the side of the molten lava falls while Death's dominion grabbed Ace as they plummeted into the boiling pits of Hell!

The boy closed his eyes and held his breath. Instead of feeling the intense heat of certain death, he discovered he was now riding upon a large wave of some water stallion carrying him to the nearby shore. Ace splashed upon the embankment not fully understanding what just happened.

Soaking wet with a watered face, Ace did his best to drain his clothes and looked back into the Mystic River. The stallion trotted along back and forth as if to reveal all it's thoroughbred glory. The water horse then shook itself with water molecules that formed a new image of some apparition.

"Virgil!" Ace shouted as he recognized the wizard's features immediately. "But, how?" There were so many questions going through the boy's mind as he simply wanted to know if this was still part of the performance. "I can see your face in the water."

"Plenty of questions and observations will be answered. We must go." Virgil was not one to mince words as he explained his time had not yet been fulfilled and that he was still capable to help in the grand design for the boy to follow the path chosen that would lead to his salvation. "Time is essential to life as seasons of change alter truth. Come now, my boy and walk with me as far as the path may allow." With that he took new form and appeared as he once was in life, yet more of an illumination of a spiritual presence. The glow was almost blinding.

The two walked together from the river to above the canyon walls where an orange sky reflected throughout. The new landscape of brilliant color dominated everything over a sea of green fields. Mounds and mounds of pumpkins were littered throughout. Large balloons filled the air as if they were cosmic satellites.

"We are now in the Land of Pumpkins." The wizard went on to explain it would take another day's journey as the Pumpkin King lived quite a distance and his seeds that were sewn along the lands stretched out to eternity. "It's only an expression, but we need to follow the great vine that leads to the Pumpkin King's promised land. I can only walk with you so far until my magic spell runs out. Time is critical."

As if by magic, Ace was now dry from the water adventure and walking along with the wizard past endless fields of pumpkins. They followed along a path in which a large vine continued with billions of connected to green tendrils which anchor the growth and protect the vine from nature. The boy was now excited to meet the Pumpkin King and hopeful this would be the moment of restoring his parents back to normal.

Much was spoken about Virgil's attempts and how he was just as determined as the boy to see this through. "Crafting wizard magic is limited," the wizard began to explain. "None of us have the ability to transform beings in such direct order as it takes a progressive effort. Your parents as children followed the greater path of evolution from amphibious creation to apes and then as themselves. It

was an earnest attempt for me to pursue and dangerous to perform. Your parents evolved beyond their years and that is why we are here. To restore them to their original state. The Pumpkin King, it is said has the power to do just that."

"I certainly hope so for the sake of me and my parents." Ace felt more confidence having the wizard by his side to help guide him along the pumpkin vines. He would be lost without him.

The massive vine soon led through a forest. For Ace, it was a comfort to filter the bright orange lights through the foliage of the woods. There was an abstract natural contrast in those areas that allowed the light to pour into the darkness. An eerie sensation in Pumpkin Land was growing as much as the vines. They would pop up unexpectedly right under the two travelers feet as they made their way forward.

"Yes, follow the vine..." Virgil bellowed. His voice began to fade. Ace was expecting something ahead as he began to lose the wizard. It was with warning that the magician stated he would only last until for a time. Apparently that time had come to an end.

"Temptation..." was the last word Ace could understand from the wizard.

"I wonder what that means?" The wizard had not spoken about religious affairs. Magic and spirituality seemed an oxymoron to realistic terminology. Most believed in either one or the other. Perhaps there was a gap between the two. After all, the wizard was dead, yet still in a living sense. It all seemed strange to Ace as he followed the path along the great vine. That was the only course he was taking in life.

The vines continued to burst forth all around. It was a constant distraction as movement became a deception of awareness. Another one growing so fast it looped around his leg. Ace shook it away and stepped forward in a rush to escape. That's when he saw something in the trees that was not a vine.

"Snake!" Ace could see clearly in the darkness. He wasn't too sure about particulars in kindness, but knew there was a snake coiling above in the branches of a tree. It lowered it's head as if able to speak to the boy.

"Try one!" The snake could speak. Unless the boy possessed some superficial snake language only he could understand, he knew exactly what the serpent was saying. It was pointing to the ground where small pumpkins were

growing. They looked like small tangerines and Ace was growing with hunger. He could not remember his last meal.

"Juicy as well," the snake went on to say. "There's lot's of vitamins in pumpkin fruits! You should eat one. Have a taste as you will need more energy before you meet the Pumpkin King!"

It all seemed surreal within the boy's understanding of all the things that gathered within his mind. The last word from the magic wizard seemed dramatic as he was helping him make his way towards his true ambition. The boy simply wanted his parents back to their normal form and no longer wishing about fantasies about Major League Baseball.

"It looks delicious, but I think I will pass for now" was his reply. Just something in his mind that did not seem to follow his heart's intentions. Perhaps that was the wizard's warning. Was it magic...or religion. Who knows or even cares at this point. The only thing that mattered was for Ace to make his way to see the Pumpkin King. He would have the answer he was looking for concerning his parent's condition.

He passed the snake without indulging through temptation. There were more obstacles along the path that

were nothing more than blind ambitions. Ace was focused on what needed to be done. He was on a mission. He was on the mound in his own back yard and knew exactly what pitch to throw at each batter. It was clear in his mind.

He walked through the forest and reached the hills just as the pumpkin skies turned to night. Stars shined brightly and that was an illumination to the boy's soul desires. He welcomed such light in that moment of darkness where he could see again with new perspective. He climbed the mountain to reach the top of the mountain. Surely, that is the summit in which he would find the Pumpkin King.

Indeed, it took all the effort he had and the boy was drained from energy. Perhaps he should have eaten from the small pumpkins for some spiritual energy. The devil does provide for self-reliance at times and that seems natural, but the boy resisted with temptation under duress as he was more focused on others. That is at least what he continued to tell himself. It had worked so far in his mind.

It was a long hike upon a mountainside and THERE HE WAS! LARGER THAN LIFE! THE PUMPKIN KING!

Strange as it may seem, the Pumpkin King had others that were helping him. There were ropes all around

him keeping him level to the ground and not allowing him to fall from one side to another. Ace could see human figures with pumpkin heads holding the ropes of a massive Pumpkin that was larger than life itself in which the vine grew from it's own origin.

Ace could not piece the puzzle together knowing there was so much more to understand, but that was the trick in that knowledge is nothing more is needed than faith. The Pumpkin King had something to do with restoring his parents to reality and that was all that really mattered. Ace stood in front of the bobbling monolith that was nothing more than a large silhouette of a global ball against an orange sun in which figures contained him from rocking about.

There was a moment. As if a long pause of contentious nervousness. Ace wanted to speak but was waiting for the Pumpkin King to deliver the first message.

"Why are you here, boy?" The Pumpkin King finally said to him.

"If you are truly the Pumpkin King, then you should know why I am here!" Ace reported back to the one who should be in position to know. "I am here to help my parents. They have gone through tragic circumstances from my own exploitations in dark magic and I am here now to face the consequences of my own actions. I love my parents very much and they mean the world to me and I am now here to make things as they once were."

The large dark silhouette of a giant pumpkin began to show some inner sensibility. Call it depth of wisdom or some inspired act of encouragement, but something happened in that moment as Ace described his love for his parents. The Pumpkin King knew that all too well and could identify with the boy's desire.

"You remind me of another soul in passing upon this universe." The Pumpkin King spoke to Ace. "His name was Jack. He made a deal with the Devil in which could never collect his soul. Satisfaction for not going to Hell I would imagine, but God did not grant him into Heaven. So, he became stuck on earth in Purgatory for everlasting life. At some point he was given a turnip and then a pumpkin to cary on the message that life had some meaning and not about some personal ambition. It's what you do for others that matter most. You may become the most valuable pitcher in the Major Leagues if you want, but it will never bring you the happiness within your heart. That comes from your true desire to know and understand the thing that

matters most. I don't need to tell you because you are here...at the edge of the universe. No other has been here to visit me for so long I cannot remember. You are her, my son and I will make a promise to you. Take may balloon back to your world and things will become more beneficial. Keep me in your heart and soul and things will work out. Thank you for coming, but take upon the balloon as fast as you can before the dragons awake."

That was all that was said, but Ace knew it was enough for him to understand the difference between fantasy and reality and to return back home.



Chapter Nineteen: The Journey Home

There was nothing left but to follow the path Ace was on towards some unknown destination along his journey. Determination would see it through and the Pumpkin King had made sense within the mind of a young boy with so much love for his parents. The large pumpkin balloon featured as many decorations as one could imagine, but it was a long way back to his home from the edge of the universe.

"My pumpkin balloon will take you back faster than the road that led you here. Worry not your troubled heart for you will be back home in *no time*."

That was a comfort to the boy coming from the Pumpkin King and riding through his time-travel balloon. Time did seem to pass quickly here in this fantastic world. The boy's imagination could never dream such a place with

all the creativity he possessed. It would be a memory unlike others, but for now he was happy to make his way back home.

The pumpkin balloon appeared like a monolithic orange sun. It had a planetary feel with it's own universe inside. An alien structure with some nebulous force that could float through time and space orbiting the galaxy. The earth seemed to stand still.

"That is a very large balloon!" Only Ace could become Captain Obvious upon boarding the ship. It contained the sun, moon and stars with some spiritual force headed towards a distant location. The boy knew he was finally going back home and the world would become what it once had been. His excitement was a loss for words.

Pumpkin-headed sentries in silk cloaks gathered around to place Ace on board. The mysterious figures held the ropes in place as the boy made his way into the basket inside the Pumpkin. Once settled, the ropes were released setting the gigantic orange ball free soaring high into the air. The edge of the universe disappeared from sight becoming a speck of sand amidst the clouds. Ace could see the entire world below him as the altitude had risen in

height. Beyond his own imagination, Ace soon fell into a deep state guided only by faith through his voyage. It was all so fantastic. If there were a Heaven it would not be all that unlike this experience. He opened his eyes for a moment and could see everything below. It was as if he were a witness watching the earth below through the lens of some supernatural presence. Concerns faded while the balloon drifted through the orange horizon with the glorious accents of blue and purple hues. Ace was on his way back home and drifted along with the reflective lights in the clouds. The wind rushing through put him in a deep trance.

So much happened on his journey. It now seemed a silver lining through the chaos. From witches to magic wizards, troll-like ogres in the mountains, oaken tree elders to pumpkin vine paths through the forest to make his way to the edge of the universe to face his fears to the Pumpkin King. It all sounds too incredible to describe once he reaches his home and no one will believe him. Perhaps that was the lesson Ace learned most of all was 'belief' comes from within the heart and soul and must be discovered for yourself.

The balloon penetrated into the Dark Forest below shining it's orange rays with a radiance into places that rarely see the light. The brilliance was overwhelming from the distant clouds. Perhaps he had been dreaming all along. He would not know for sure until he returned home. He reminisced about those things he missed the most. Pitching in his own back yard amongst the trees. Gidget, of course had been left behind. He couldn't wait to get back to his pet and things will return to how they were before. The birds, the garden and all the joys he found in nature. He could not wait to lay down on his pillow in his bedroom. The simple things now seemed more majestic after the journey to understand responsibility. The lesson taught him more than life itself.

He began to think about family. Those were his own roots and vine systems providing the means for his needs. Those cinematic filmstrips in which the entire family gathered may wear over time, but the memories will never fade. There was often joy and laughter, pain and suffering, and a kaleidoscope of emotional visions in which life is projected through the mind's eye.

Life had only just began and there were already so many memories. Rushing past him in a flash of light as if time stood still in one instant. It may be that Ace was traveling at light speed on his way back home.

He opened his eyes again to see. Seated next to him was a young girl. It surprised him as he almost jumped out his seat in the balloon basket. "Where did she come from?" he asked himself thinking was the only one on board!

"Hello!" Ace acknowledged her presence.

"Hello." The young girl replied.

"What is your name?" She finally broke the ice after an awkward silence.

"My name is actually Christian, but everybody calls me 'Ace.' He thought it best to be more formal and provide her with his true name and let her decide what to call him.

"My name is Faith. I am just along for the ride and thought you might enjoy the company." Thoughtful to express concerns about the boy's condition, the girl seemed very pleasant and attractive.

"Why do they call you 'Ace?' she wanted to know the distinction.

"It has something to do with throwing a baseball. The best pitchers in the major leagues are often referred to as 'Ace.' I want to be one when I grow up and my father just always calls me by that name."

"It makes sense," Faith agreed. "I like both names she approved.

"Are your parents religious?" Ace asked as few pick their own names. He was glad she was now there sitting by his side to keep him company.

"They do spend time at church," she admitted, "but I think I was named after a famous singer."

"Makes sense." Ace offered the same sentiment. "How did you get here? I thought I was the only one on board."

"Like you, I am going home." She offered an answer. "Perhaps you just didn't see me before."

"No, I don't think I did." The boy was often very perceptive with his surroundings and wasn't going to push the point. "I am going back to my family. I put them through hell and the Pumpkin King said everything would be okay when I get back home. Did you see the Pumpkin King, too?"

"I think you're going to be a really good pitcher." She changed the subject. "Don't try to grow up too fast, Ace. There's plenty of time to enjoy life as a child for most."

Ace wasn't quite clear what she meant by that, but felt a sense of accomplishment already that she confided in his ambition to become a pitcher as an adult. Faith smiled at him. His heart skipped a beat knowing nothing about love at such a young age.

"You love your parents and they love you." She stated rather poignantly. "Plenty of love becomes lost in the river of doubt." Faith was now going over the boy's head as he struggled with his rational and logical sense of meaning.

It sounded like a sweet conviction of the truth. He found comfort in her voice. Her soft tone was magic to him. It felt a blessing to have her as a companion as each made their way back home. Ace wondered if they may meet again.

The fantastic dream voyage was almost over for both of them. Ace looked over the basket to notice how much closer he was to home. He pointed down to the earth with a reenergized excitement showing her all those places he had been. "Where is your home?" he wanted to know?

"There may not be answers to all your questions down there," she pointed out more philosophy to the boy's logical mind. "Many go from one place to another and we don't always know the reason."

"To answer your question, Ace" she addressed him again, "I will not be going down there with you. I am going to another place." That did not make much sense to the boy.

"Where else can you go?" was his short response.

Another long moment of silence as they both stared at one another for what seemed an eternity. She appeared to looking through his eyes and directly into his soul. Without a word, she looked up into the sky towards the Heavens.

"Faith is what we have that gets us from one place to another." She assured Ace. Suddenly her words began to make sense. Not all that take the ride on the Pumpkin King's balloon still live in the land of the living. His heart broke for her. She pressed her lips against his and sealed him with a kiss.

"We will be together in spirit." Nothing else was said except for a last salutation.

"Christian."

"Faith."



Chapter Twenty: Strikeout

Faith disappeared into the glorious Heavenly clouds while the balloon continued to ride the wind towards his home. The boy was stunned and turned his mind to the future rather than what he could not change in the past. He wondered why the Pumpkin King could not save her. Perhaps death is certain and once life is taken, it cannot be returned to nature. Only Faith could go to that place where she now belonged.

There was more hidden meaning to her departure and the balloon began to shift. Turbulence with the winds of change began to rock the basket. Ace wasn't clear how the balloon navigated itself. All he knew is that it was his guide to get back home.

It all seemed like a dream and yet there was earth from above. It looked realistic to Ace. The balloon began to rise again.

"Oh No!" Ace shouted. Nobody could hear him at this altitude. Nobody could help. He was now drifting off course. What could he do to reach the earth? He tugged on one of the ropes. That wasn't helping. He tried jumping up and down in the basket. His weight made no difference.

The balloon finally cleared the mountainside where the Wizard school was located. As if by magic a sudden burst of air calmed the turbulence and the descent was stabilized. The balloon finally made it's way to the edge of the Dark Forest. It hovered just above and waited.

The large oak tree was just below and so Ace grabbed one of the ropes along the side of the Pumpkin balloon to lure himself into the tree. The radiance allowed him to climb down to safety without breaking any of the trees branches. His feet landed upon the earth and the boy collapsed under the oak tree elder.

"How was your trip?" The tree asked. Odd that only Ace could hear the whispers of nature.

"We will see," Ace was back where he belonged, but not yet home. "Thank you for all your knowledge, Oak Tree." The old tree moved it's facial bark as if to smile at the boy. Perhaps it was all within the mind of the boy's imagination, but nature provided knowledge of the earth.

"Let's get you where you need to be." The elder oak tree shook it's leaves while the others began to cheer. Had it all been a dream. Ace knew his journey was not part of his imagination. It was real!

Ace suddenly found himself dressed in uniform with his black Mizuno glove on the pitching mound with the Spalding baseball in his hand. Cheers now came from the crowded stands of the Little League baseball field while his teammates encouraged his next pitch. Their opponents shouted insults. The Giants were at bat. Ace was not aware of the pitch count nor the score.

The curse had affected him as much as his parents, but there was his dad in the dugout providing signals to the catcher. Everything was back to normal. It was hard to focus on pitching at a time when Ace realized he had succeeded in reversing the curse for his parents. He had

learned his lesson about responsibility. He had discovered so many other facets of life on his journey.

Critical game situation as the team were down a couple of runs and Ace went to bat to fill the extra position on the field of play. His father placed his son next in the lineup to replace Jack and it was his turn to hit. Ace wasn't quite certain about the move. He would be sure to pitch in the bottom half of the inning and did not understand his father's decision for him to bat with two outs. I guess there was nothing to lose and his father wasn't expecting a miracle.

Ace took a few practice swings to show the Giants he could push wood around. He stepped up to the plate and began to think about what the other pitcher may be thinking. First pitch Strike he assumed and reached back knocking the ball into deep right center. Ace had a triple! He considered running around to score, but the third base coach held him back. Never risk the last out as they say in baseball!

"Shorty" they called the next kid coming to bat. A curveball that broke too far into him as he was hit by the pitch. The Pirates suddenly had runners on First and Third

with two outs. They needed those runs to tie the game and the crowd roared with excitement.

Virgil or "The Wiz kid" came up to the plate. Most of the players had nicknames and few of the players knew their real ones. I was honor amongst boys in the spirit of the game to create their own identity. There was confidence in him as a hitter. He often struck out as many times as he would get a hit. One never really could predict, but the Giants pitcher was losing his control and the endurance of the game was wearing down his arm. This was the Pirates opportunity to take advantage. "The Wiz Kid" swung at the first two pitches and found himself in a hole. No balls, two strikes. The next pitch went foul down the right field fence. At least he made contact with the ball to avoid a third strike. The Giants pitcher then wasted a pitch outside. Then another. 2 Balls, 2 Strikes was the pitch count and the pitcher could not afford to go to a full count. He did not want to risk loading up the bases.

'The Wiz Kid' knew this was opportunistic so he swung for the fences on a fastball down the middle of the plate. HOME RUN! The Pirates took the lead in the game!

"You've got this, son." His father told him as if that had some new message. "Now be the Ace we need and let's win this! Three up and Three Down! Let's go team! Be alert!"

Ace looked into the catcher's mitt. He was performing again and needed to focus on the task at hand. It was Smoky at the plate for the Giants and could do damage if the game were close. The catcher gave the signal. Ace called for his catcher to have a brief consultation and to find out the score. Ace wanted to be sure of the score. He wanted the signal. Smoky was at bat for the Giants and could do some damage with one swing, so it was clear not to give him anything within reach because the game was on the line and the slightest mistake could be fatal. The catcher wanted a Slider on the inside.

The pitch looked as if it were headed straight at Smoky and he backed off the plate just as the ball curved into the strike zone. STRIKE ONE!

Ace drew his breath and let out a deep sigh. His slider was working it's magic. He stepped back onto the pitching rubber for a solid foothold as he often practiced and looked into the catchers mitt. The hand signal revealed

another slider but on the outside of the plate. Ace was nervous but went through the windup in perfect form and let loose of the ball knowing it would head straight and curve away. Smoky swung the bat as hard as he could and missed by a mile. The pitcher's slider had fooled the batter again. STRIKE TWO!

The count was a silver lining with two strikes and no balls. One strike away would save the game for the Pirates. What pitch would work? Ace walked around the mound thinking to himself before looking back at the catcher. He caught a glimpse of his managing father with a deep concern on his face. One swing of the bat would end the season with a loss or one missed opportunity for an out would end the game with victory. There was only so much time to consider the pitch.

Ace began to lose focus on the mound. His vision began to blur. His mind was on other things as if overwhelmed. He stepped off the mound and paced around for a moment. Perhaps it was the glove his dog had chewed. Maybe it was the broken vase he would need to answer to his parents. Who was Jack? The boy had given him the glove. Ace never knew he was on the team. Questions began to swirl through his mind.

His father called for a consultation on the mound. He may have noticed something was wrong. The catcher came out as well. "I'm thinking fastball right down the middle of the plate." It was a risky pitch to throw. "Smoky isn't expecting the pitch and may lay off a pitch thinking you're gonna make him chase a couple outside."

Ace got back on the mound and finally regained his focus and blurred vision. He stared into the catcher's mitt. He then looked at Smoky. The crowd was going crazy with excitement

Ace took another deep sigh. He trusted his father and believed in himself. The young pitcher went through the motions of his windup and released the fastball heading straight into the center of the strike zone. Smoky pulled the bat back with his arm with the slightest hesitation and then swung well behind the pitch after it crossed the plate.

Smoky hung his head knowing the game is just as mental as it is physical and that one pitch should have been one he could hit over the fence.

"STRIKE THREE! GAME OVER!" Came the call from the umpire. A three pitch strikeout had won the game for the Pirates! Ace could not believe it. It all seemed

surreal in his mind as the pressure of a Little League game had built into such a fantastic ending.



Chapter Twenty-One: Game Over

"Strike Three!" Ace was overjoyed and threw his black Mizuno glove as high as he could into the air. That was the moment he realized the Pumpkin King had taken him to his original moment of imagining the game in his own back yard. Gidget barked and the trees cheered through the foliage. Magic was in the air and the big orange pumpkin sun showed it's rays through the breaking clouds.

"Dinner is ready!" His mom shouted from the press box window of their home. "Come on in before it get's cold!"

Ace made sure to collect his baseball glove and ran through the back of the house as Gidget chased knowing it was time to eat. It all seemed too fantastic to be a dream and the boy finally understood how responsibility was the one thing within his control that could determine his actions

Life was back to normal and he hugged his mother with all his strength to let her know how much he cared. He thanked his father for the efforts of building his character through the many roles of managing, coaching, and just being a dad. The overwhelming sensation within the boy's heart had every indication he was turning into a young man. There was a distinctive difference in attitude and responsibility from that point on and even if it was all part of his imagination, it was as real as the truth.

"I made your favorite recipe. Old-Fashioned Barbecue Chicken!" Jules had been at it since early that morning. She was back to all her mom duties while dad read through the newspaper to catch up on all the news. Ace had reversed the curse in his mind and happy to be a growing boy.

"That's Great, Mom!" Ace complimented his mother's cooking as she was a true southern belle that enjoyed the labors of love in family.

"Would you look at that! The American League won the All-Star game again. Ninth year in a row. The National League needs a Designated Hitter in my opinion." His father still had all the passion for baseball and sports in general. Managing the Little League team gave him an inner pride and kept him in touch with the youth of the world. So much respect for a father that volunteered to do much for other kids.

"Great call yesterday, dad!" Ace emphasized about the results and strategy of the fastball on a 0-2 pitch count.

"You're the one who came through for us, Ace. Besides, I knew what the other coach was thinking and probably told Smoky to lay off the next pitch. Father's know best, right?"

After dinner, Ace went to his room petting Gidget by his side and the baseball glove lay on top of his dresser cabinet. He put on his headphones to listen to music. Gidget stared at the glove with the ball inside and the boy looked at her very sternly. She never chewed his glove again. That reminded Ace about Jack and he just imagined he was out there in the world wandering aimlessly with a purpose to living. The Jack O'Lantern does carry the light for others on earth and perhaps he is just one of the Pumpkin King's emissaries caught between Heaven and Hell at the edge of the universe.

Ace was no longer certain about the differences between his imagination and reality, but it was clear there was magic along life's chosen path. From dark forests to under mountains to the land of pumpkins and the edge of the universe. It is the journey and not a destination that builds character in the end.

"Carry on my Wayward Son!" An old classic song from many years ago still resonates today as a song on the radio that has a much deeper meaning now. The music soon faded from his iPod and the boy began to dream. Gidget sighed. It had been a great game and and fantastic adventure. Victory!

Epilogue:

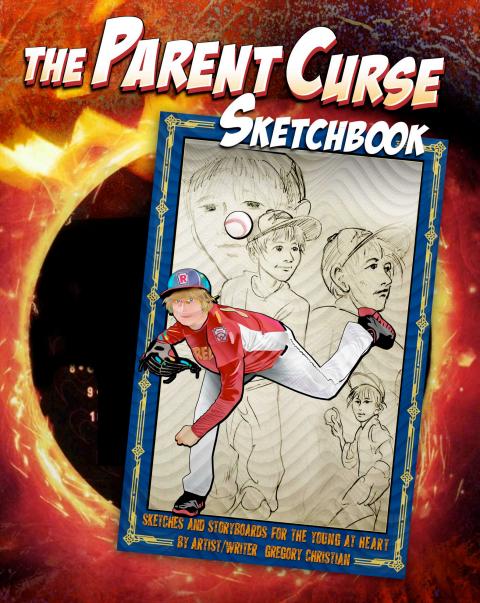
The season would continue and practice always makes perfect. The Dude had shown Ace how to throw a knuckleball. It's a junk pitch, but may come in handy during game situations. The trick was to throw the ball without using the stitches on the seam of the ball. Also, the ball must be released with all fingers at the same time. There were a few amazing pitchers in the Major Leagues that had great knuckleball pitches and Ace was open to new

ideas and skills. Unique in that the ball travels towards the plate and suddenly drops in mid air unexpectedly.

"OK, Here it goes!" Ace was ready to see the knuckleball work in action. He took a deep breath and went through the windup carrying his moment forward. Gidget barked just as Ace released. The spalding baseball went flying far off to the right lifting higher and higher out of control and crashed through the window of his parent's kitchen!

The boy heard his full Christian name from inside the kitchen as the glass shattered into a million fragments.

Game Over!



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