We have to leave the old lady’s place because you never know, the cops might come knocking on each door.

“They’re like bugs,” my father says. “They’re not too smart, but there’s lots of them and they keep at it.”

On the other side of the alley is this boarded-up building, it used to be part of the Testaments until a fire burned it out, and my father decides we’ll hide there until Iggy gets a car for us. He reaches out and pulls off a big piece of plywood with one hand. The screechy noise the nails make sounds like a cat fight, and the next thing there’s a real cat, a black one, that leaps out from behind the plywood. My father jumps so hard, he yanks me to the ground and I bump my head.

“Dumb animal,” he says. “Get up now, that’s just a scratch, a little blood never hurt a man.”

It doesn’t hurt, and anyhow I sort of like the taste of salt in my mouth, it makes me feel awake.

“Get in there,” he says and then he’s pulling me through this old burned-out window and we’re inside the building.

Everything is black and wet and dripping except for where snow has come down through holes in the roof. Most of the inside walls are gone, and you can see where the center beam was chewed by the fire. All the old pipes and wires are hanging down, and everywhere underfoot is broken glass the color of smoke.

“I used to wonder exactly what Hell looked like,” he says. “Now I know.”

He finds a place where the stairs go down into the basement and he pulls away the boards and planks. “You should feel right at home,” he says. “Cooped up like you were in that cellar hole.”

It’s so dark he has to use a cigarette lighter, and the flame is so puny, you still can’t see to the bottom of the stairs. “You go first,” he says. “We can’t have both of us on the same step. It might break.”

The steps are made of thick wood, but slick and punky soft where the water has been dripping all these years, and I can feel how it sags under my feet. There’s a rail that’s hard to grab with my hands tied, and the way he’s holding up the lighter you might as well keep your
eyes closed because it's that dark, you can't see a thing.

I slip and start to fall, and then he's pulling back on the rope and I'm hanging there in the middle of the air with my feet skittering and he's going, "Easy does it, boy. We'll take this one step at a time."

Finally we get to the bottom. There's a little slant of light coming through this narrow cellar window, enough so we can feel our way around all the burned junk that has fallen through the floor.

"The accommodations could be better," he says. "I'll grant you that. Soon as Iggy fixes things, we'll be on our way."

He ties my feet back up and loops the rope tight around this old busted-up boiler that's tipped over, so I can't move or see what's behind me.

"Understand you can't be trusted quite yet," he says. "Once we get on the road, things will be different. You'll get smarter, every mile we put between us and this place."

He rips a piece off my shirt and ties it on my mouth so I can't be shouting, he says, and wake up the neighborhood. He rubs his hand through my hair again, real gentle. I'm pretty sure there's this sweet smile on his face, although it's so dim you can't be sure. "You just sit tight here a minute," he says. "I have to see a man about a car."

Then he's gliding away, and I hold myself still in case this is a trick and he's really sneaking up behind me to see if I can get my hands loose. Which I can't, they're numb and bloated from the rope cutting into my wrists, and finally I stop trying and just sit there letting my eyes open up in the dark.

I can barely make out that narrow window. Hardly big enough so a cat could slip through, and under it is this big pile of coal slagged up against the foundation wall. Overhead there's creaking with the weight of him moving around, trying to be light on his feet.

I'm listening to him up there and trying to see out that little window when something moves against the light.

I'm pretty sure there's a scratching sound coming from the window, except you can't always believe what you hear in the dark. Then whatever it is goes away and I'm thinking it was probably a cat, or maybe a dog sniffing around. Finally I just keep still, because the more I move, the tighter the rope gets.

Next thing, I hear someone on the steps, these light feet trying to be real quiet, and then a flash-light comes on and this woman's voice says, "You there, kid?"

Loretta Lee.

I can't say anything because of the gag. All I can do is sort of kick around a little, let her know where I am. You can tell by her shaky, thin voice she's scared of the dark. "Kid? Tell me that's you. Oh, Lord Jesus, what am I doing down here?"
Then the beam of that flashlight is hitting me right in the eyes, and she’s tripping over stuff trying to get to me. First thing she does is pull the gag off, and I take a deep, deep breath that makes my lungs burn.

“It ain’t right,” she whispers. “Keeping your own kid tied up, it ain’t right. He ain’t the man I thought I remembered, that’s for sure.”

I want to say something, but I’m not sure what and anyhow my mouth is too dry. She’s put the flashlight on the floor, aiming up so she can try to untie the rope.

“The man is a genius for knots,” she says. I can feel how her hands are shaking as she’s fumbling around. Also I can hear the boards creaking overhead but you can’t be sure, it might be just the wind.

Loretta goes, “The plan is, Iggy keeps him busy while I get you loose, now isn’t that a good plan? There’s enough cops up there to start a war, we’ll be safe enough we get out of this godforsaken place.”

Her hands are pulling at the rope, nervous and quick, but the knots just keep getting tighter. Finally she gets this idea to cut the rope on the ragged edge of the boiler. “I saw this in the movies once,” she whispers. “I forget what movie.”

She’s working the rope against the sharp edge of that old boiler and sure enough, it cuts through. Just the one cut won’t do it, though, and she has to do it twice more before my wrists get loose, and I can’t really help much because my hands are all numb and swollen.

“Next thing is this piece around your ankles,” she says. “I sure can’t carry you up out of here. You think you can walk, I get this loose?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

That makes her giggle. “My, ain’t we got polite all of a sudden,” she says. “There, that should about do it.”

My feet come loose and I try to stand up and I have to lean some of my weight on her. She goes, “Just a second, Sugar, let me get this flashlight.”

She bends over for the flashlight, and then she’s making this sound like something is caught in her throat.

Two big hands are squeezing her neck. I see how my father is coming huge out of the dark and he’s got his hands around her throat, shoving her back.

“You ignorant creature,” he says. “I’ll teach you to put your dirty hands on my son.”

Loretta can’t say anything, she’s sinking down to her knees and trying to pull his hands away from her neck, but it’s useless, she can’t stop him, he’s squeezing her dead with his bare hands, and no one can stop him, no one, no one.
20.  
Freak the Mighty Strikes Again

Even a total goon like me knows you can’t stop Killer Kane, but I go ahead and try anyhow. My hands are still numbed out and I can hardly walk, so all I can do is sort of fall on top of him and try to shove him loose from her.

I’m going, “Stop! I see you! I see you! Daddy, please please stop, you’re killing her!”

He just twitches me away. He’s made of iron and steel, he’s gritting his teeth and squeezing her neck. You can see the whites of her eyes, and she’s not even trying to get away anymore.

I try to get between them and I’m going, “I saw you kill her! I saw you kill Mom! I never forgot, not ever! I know you did it! I know!”

It’s like I’m trapped underwater or something, so weak and floaty I can’t hardly fight him, can’t pry his fingers loose from my mother’s neck. From Loretta’s neck. Because everything is mixed up and he’s doing the same thing to Loretta Lee he did to my mom, choking the life out of her, and he’s got that same cold killer look because he wants her to die, like he wanted Mom to die, and nothing else matters except what he wants.

I’m there in the dark, pushing at him. The light catches her eyes and I can see her looking at me, she’s so far away it’s like I’m four years old again, peeking out from behind the bedroom door and then running to bang my little fists at him while the light fades from her eyes.

I can’t get him loose of her, so all I can do is keep screaming, “I know you killed her! I saw you! I saw you do it! You killed her and I’ll never forget, not ever!”

Finally he kind of jerks his head and I can feel him looking at me and then his hands open. Loretta slips away and I can hear her breathing like a broken bird in the cellar dark.

“What?,” he says, reaching for me. “What did you say?”

“I saw you do it,” I say. “I saw you kill my mother.”

“You weren’t but four years old,” he says, and now his big hands are starting to curl around my neck, except he’s holding me soft. I can feel his heart beating, and his cool breath in my face that makes me want to fall asleep. “You can’t possibly recall that event,” he says. “You think you can, but you can’t.”

“I can,” I say. “I do.”

“That’s the poison they put in your mind, boy. They brainwashed you into thinking you can remember.”
Freak the Mighty

He's pulling me closer, holding me soft by the neck, and now I can feel the pulse in his hands.
"They never talk about it," I say. "They don't have to because I can't ever forget it, no matter how much I try."

"No," he says, and his face is so close, I can feel the heat rising off him. "Impossible, you can't."

"You were wearing your brown corduroy trousers," I say, talking so fast, it makes me shake inside. "And the black T-shirt with no sleeves. I tried to stop you and I couldn't, and you carried me back into my room and put me to bed and told me I was just dreaming. You locked me in that room and I ran to the window and broke it with my hand and started yelling for someone to come and help Mommy."

My father sighs and says, "Lord, I wish you hadn't done that, boy. It cost me years."

"They caught you, Daddy, and they put you away forever except then you fooled them and they let you go."

"I have to clean this up," he says, like he's talking to himself alone. "I have to clean this up and get out of here."

That's when his hands start to tighten hard and fast around my neck. I'm trying to fight him but I'm so small and weak and he's so big and strong, you can't stop him, no one can stop Killer Kane.

He squeezes and squeezes and squeezes.
I'm in this faraway place, falling backwards

real slow and dreamy, when I hear a window breaking. Then a small faraway voice is saying, "Put your hands up, villain!" and I really am falling and the air is coming back into my lungs so fast, it hurts.

I'm lying there all crumpled up sideways. I can see Freak. He's rolled down through the cellar window into the pile of coal, and he's trying to stand up.

"I'm warning you," he says in that fierce bold way he has.

He's got a squirt gun, one of those big blaster models that holds about a gallon of water.

Killer Kane is looking at me, he's looking at Loretta all crumpled and moaning, he's looking at Freak. Then he shakes his head and goes, "I know a real gun when I see it, you little monster."

He makes a move, reaching out. Freak scuttles back a little ways but he can't really run and even if he could, there's no place to go.

"This is your partner in crime?" Killer Kane says to me. "I guess maybe you are a retard after all."

Freak is pointing the squirt gun right in his face and he says, "Guess what I got for Christmas, Mr. Kane? Guess right, because your life depends on it."

Killer Kane doesn't say anything, he's just reaching out real slow because he knows that Freak can't get away.

"This squirt gun," Freak says. "And a chem-
Killer Kane just looks at the squirt gun. He shakes his head, like who are you kidding? "Sulfuric acid," Freak says, raising up the gun and sighting along the barrel. "Good ol' reliable $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$, an oily, colorless, corrosive liquid used in dyes, paints, explosives, and many chemical experiments."

Killer Kane says, "You're lying, kid, you can't fool me."

That's when Freak squeezes the trigger and sprays him right in the eyes.

Then Killer Kane is screaming in this high, scared voice. His hands are scrubbing at his eyes and it's like that scream wakes me up, because the next thing I know I've got Freak in my arms and I'm running through the dark for the stairs, running as fast as I can on feet I can't even feel.

"Go!" Freak is yelling. "He's right behind you, go!"

I can't look back but I can feel him, feel the icy-cold breath of him on the back of my neck, and the hands reaching blind to grab me and then I'm going up the stairs, just flying.

The steps are breaking under my feet and he's howling in rage behind me, his hands are scrabbling at my ankles and for just a second he has me.

I kick loose and then we're up on the first floor, bursting out of the cellar hole. I can see daylight coming through the boarded-up plywood and I cover Freak with my arms and just dive right through that plywood, wham.

The sunlight blinds me and we're skitter-rolling through the clean, cold snow.

Hands are grabbing at me, and I'm fighting to get away.

"Easy!" a voice says. "Take it easy, kid, you're okay!"

Iggy Lee. He's looking down at me with red eyes and you can see where he's been chewing at his beard. I'm sitting there in the snow squinting up at Iggy and all these cops, there must be a million cops, and Freak is laughing like a maniac and saying, "It worked! He fell for it! Soap and vinegar and curry powder! It worked like a charm!"

I don't understand what he's talking about right then, it's only later I figure out there wasn't any real acid in the squirt gun, it was soap and vinegar and curry powder that made Killer Kane think his eyes were burning up — Killer Kane, who is still rubbing frantic at his eyes and begging for help when they put the handcuffs on him and shove him into the back of a police van.

All I've got room to think about is poor Loretta. That's what I'm telling the cops, that she's down there in the cellar. I'm afraid that no one is listening but they must be, because right away they're bringing her up out of the cellar and Iggy is running to her and crying out her name.

"She's still breathing," somebody says.

Then Gram is shoving through the crowd of cops and Grim is right behind her, and Gwen is
there, too, and everybody is making a big, sloppy fuss, especially Gram, who's hugging me so tight I can't hardly breathe.

The Fair Gwen is hugging Freak and she's saying, "I told you to stay in that car, didn't I? Didn't I?"

Freak, he's looking over her shoulder at me looking over Gram's shoulder, and he gives me the thumbs-up as she carries him away.

"Freak the Mighty!" he says. "Freak the Mighty strikes again!"

We all of us had to go down to the police station, of course, where they took a bunch of pictures of the bruises on my neck, and then they insisted I needed X rays and so we had to go over to the hospital and get that done and then go back to the police station again, which wore on my nerves almost as much as being kidnapped.

Grim, the second time we go to the cops, he's sitting there in this room with me waiting, and he says, "I can't tell you what it felt like, coming up out of the basement and seeing that double track of footprints in the snow. I knew it was him, I just knew in my heart."

He kept insisting that Gram go home, which she finally did, because we were there at the police station for hours more, me telling all about it over and over, until I thought I would faint dead away if just one more person asked me what happened after I woke up in the dark and was stolen from my own bed.

Grim, he just keeps patting me on the arm
and saying, “This is important, Max. Maybe this time they’ll lock him up for good.”

That’s what everybody keeps saying, that this time they’ve got Killer Kane where they want him, in violation of parole, in violation of a restraining order, abduction of a minor, and two counts of attempted murder, me and the Heroic Biker Babe, which is what the papers took to calling Loretta Lee.

The word is she’s hurt pretty bad because he cracked a bone in her neck, but she’ll be okay in the long run. Iggy, when I saw him that time in the hospital waiting, he was chewing a hole right through his beard he was so worried, and it made me think he wasn’t such a bad dude after all.

It all goes to show, like Grim says, that you can’t always judge a book by the cover.

It turns out to be a pretty weird Christmas vacation, as you might imagine, and Gram keeps fussing at me and won’t let me sleep in the cellar.

“I don’t care if he is under lock and key,” she says.

Grim, he says please humor the woman, she’s worried about to death, and so I sleep upstairs on the foldout and at night Gram keeps checking to see I’m there. Which is a pain, but she can’t help herself, and anyhow I’m just as glad not to be alone in the down under.

Freak, well, the Fair Gwen just about threw a fit when she got him home, because of him disobeying a direct order and sneaking away to rescue me, but after a while she calms down and all she does is just look at him and shake her head.

“What am I going to do with you?” she asks. “Put me up for adoption,” he says. “I want to go live with the Waltons.”

He means the TV show that keeps repeating, and of course he’s teasing her, but the Fair Gwen is not amused.

“No more crazy adventures or dangerous quests, young man. You have to be careful,” she keeps saying. “Extra careful.”

She means the trouble he has sometimes catching his breath, because of the way his insides keep growing faster than his outside, which hasn’t really grown at all.

Freak goes into the medical research place every few months now, which he says is a real pain, not that it actually hurts.

“Dr. Spivak says my unique status as a marvel of genetic aberration makes me an object of intense curiosity,” he says in that lofty way of his. “Specialists from the world over are familiar with my case.”

“What about the secret operation?” I ask when the Fair Gwen can’t hear us. “The one where you’ll get a robot body?”

Freak gets this very cool, scientific look on his face, and he always says the same thing: “The bionic research continues, my friend. The work goes on.”
Freak the Mighty

I don't know why I keep asking, because it gives me the creeps. You'd think I could be as cool as Freak about the idea, because it's him that's going to get a new bionic body, but just thinking about it makes me want to jump up and run around.

I keep telling Gram that when Freak is in the hospital for his tests I shouldn't have to go to school, because we're like a team, but she won't buy it.

"I know Kevin has been a great help to you," she says. "But you've got a brain of your own, haven't you dear?"

Yeah, right.

The other thing about school that's different after Christmas vacation is how jealous everybody is that we got our pictures in the paper and on the local TV; Mrs. Donelli in English calls us "the dynamic duo" and she put a cutout picture from the paper up on the bulletin board. Wouldn't you know some goon put mustaches on us the very first day.

Freak says he looks cool with a mustache and he can't wait to grow one, and he makes Mrs. Donelli leave the picture up. Me, I'd just as soon forget about the whole thing. I really hate the idea of having to testify at the trial and tell what really happened, but everybody says I have to, if I want him locked up for the rest of his life. Which I do, especially after what he tried to do to poor Loretta, who was only trying to help.

"They can't make you if you don't want to,"

The Accident of Nature

Freak says, "A son doesn't have to testify against his father."

"Grim thinks it will do me good. Plus he's really worried he'll get off again, or fool the jury by quoting from the Bible."

"Grim worries too much," Freak says. "Everybody worries too much."

The way it finally turns out with Killer Kane, Freak is right. Because just before the trial is supposed to start, and I've got my fingernails chewed down to the second knuckle, Grim gets this telephone call that makes him punch his fist in the air and go, "Yes! Yes!"

What happened, they made a deal and Killer Kane pled guilty, which means he has to serve out the rest of his original sentence plus ten more years.

"He'll be an old man when he gets out," Grim says. "He'll be older than me."

That should make me happy, but instead I feel really weird and worried, and Grim, who still thinks he knows everything, says I just have to get used to the idea.

"The man is an accident of nature," he says. "All you got from him is your looks and your size. You've got your mother's heart, and that's what counts."

The weird thing I keep thinking about, what if something happens when I get older and I turn out to be another accident of nature?

Grim sees me thinking about that one night just before bed, and he sits on the end of the
foldout and he says, "Things will make a lot more sense when you finish growing up, Maxwell. Now sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite."

Grim means well, I know that, but sometimes he says the numbest things. Because it's growing up that worries me.

"Spring has sprung," Freak says. "And so are we."

This is the day school gets out, and we're taking the long way home. By now I've been carrying him around on my shoulders for almost a year. We call it walking high, and even if we haven't been going on any dangerous quests lately, so the Fair Gwen won't have to throw a fit, Freak hasn't exactly given up on slaying dragons.

"The world is really and truly green all over," he says. "Do you remember what it used to be like, back in the Ice Age, when the glaciers covered the earth and the saber-toothed tiger roamed the frozen night?"

"Uh, no," I say. "How could I remember that? I wasn't even born."

"Don't be a pinhead," he says. "Remembering is just an invention of the mind."
I go, “What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you want to, you can remember anything, whether it happened or not. Like I can remember what it was like in the Ice Age. I kept trying to invent stuff — the wheel, central heating, indoor plumbing — but the Neanderthals were happy with just a campfire and a fur coat.”

If you guessed that Freak has been reading a book about the Ice Age, you're right. He's been seeing a saber-toothed tiger behind every bush, except that so far, all of them have turned out to be stray cats, or once it was this skunk and it's a good thing I can run fast or we'd have to soak in tomato juice, which is the only way to get rid of the stink.

“Inventing electricity would be tough,” he says, “without copper wire and magnets, but I could handle inventing a compass — all you have to do is rub the needle. That way everybody could head south and get away from the glaciers.”

“First you need to invent a time machine,” I say. “So you can go back there and give all the cavemen a hard time about indoor plumbing.”

Freak goes, “You don't need a time machine if you know how to remember.”

Which is something I'll always remember, him saying that and me trying to figure it out.

Freak's birthday is a couple of days after school gets out, and the Fair Gwen has already made it clear he's not getting a ride on the space shuttle.

“Thirteen is supposed to be extra special,” he says. “The least you could do is get my name on the list. Or how about a linear accelerator, just a small one so I can split a few atoms?”

The Fair Gwen goes, “I suppose this means you're going to be an obnoxious teenager.”

The deal is, this is really two birthdays for the price of one, because Freak the Mighty is almost a year old.

“Talk about a prodigy,” Freak says. “One year old and already he's on his way to ninth grade.”

The Fair Gwen just rolls her eyes when we talk like that. Freak says we can't expect her to understand, because you can't really get what it means to be Freak the Mighty unless you are Freak the Mighty.

Anyhow, the party is just a family affair because Freak isn't supposed to get overexcited, which is like saying the moon isn't supposed to go around the earth.

“Last year I got the ornithopter,” he says. “This year, why not a helicopter? A real one, though, you can't expect a teenager to play with toys.”


What he's really getting, and I've been sworn to secrecy, is this new computer, the one he's been drooling over in his computer magazines. It comes with a modem, which means if he has
to stay home for some reason, he can go to school over the telephone. The idea is I'd be there in the classroom with a matching computer. The only problem, I don't know squid about computers.

"You'll learn," the Fair Gwen says. "Kevin will teach you."

"But why would he have to stay home?" I ask her.

We're out in the kitchen and she and Gram are frosting the cakes and Freak is hanging out in the living room, acting like he intends to have a party every day for the rest of his life.

"Maybe he won't have to stay home," the Fair Gwen says, and she and Gram kind of lock eyeballs for a second, that secret code that mothers have. "This is just in case, Max."

"I think maybe he already guessed about the computer," I say. "That's why he's jerking your chain about the space shuttle ride and Learjets."

"I'm not surprised," the Fair Gwen says. "You can't keep anything from Kevin."

Freak hardly touches his supper, he says he's saving his appetite for the cake, and finally we're all done eating except for Grim, who keeps rubbing his belly and rolling his eyes and telling the Fair Gwen what a genius she is with fresh peas and new potatoes and salmon and he'll have just a smidgeon more, thanks, until finally Gram clears her throat and smiles and Grim has to apologize for being such a pig.

The funny thing is, when at last they do bring out the cake, Freak asks me to flame out the candles while he makes the wish, and then he doesn't even touch his piece, he just sort of pushes it around the plate. I figure he's so excited about getting the new computer that he's lost his appetite. Not that he's letting on he doesn't feel good, he's acting just as wise and smart-mouthed as ever.

"I should have asked for earplugs," he says when we're done singing "Happy Birthday." "You better check the glassware for cracks."

"Hush up," the Fair Gwen says, "or we'll give you another chorus."

When she brings out the computer he acts so surprised and happy, maybe he really is surprised. Right away he wants to turn it on and show off what a brain he is, and because it's his birthday we all have to sit there and admire him and go, "Amazing," and "Fantastic," and "Kevin, how did you know that?" and so on.

He's showing Grim how to play 3-D chess, and just watching that makes me dizzy, so after a while I go out to the kitchen and help clean up, which is something I'm good at.

"Maxwell never breaks a dish," Gram is saying. "He's very sure-handed for someone so large."

We're almost done putting stuff away and wiping the counter when Grim shouts from the other room.

All he says is, "Kevin!" but we can tell right away that something is wrong.
Freak the Mighty

We run in and Freak is leaning back in his chair making this wheezing sound, panting real fast, and his eyelids are flickering.

"He's having a seizure," Grim says. "Call an ambulance."

The Fair Gwen is already on the phone.
I run out in the street and start waving my arms and jumping up and down so they'll know where to stop, and I keep running back in the house to check on things, but the Fair Gwen says there's nothing we can do except wait.

They won't let me visit him the first day, and Gram says I'll just have to be patient and let the doctors do their business, but I can't stand just sitting around so I decide to walk over to the hospital, which Grim says is miles and miles, but suit myself.

I know how to get there because Freak and I went yonder that way once so he could show me the medical research building. It's not the same, though, without Freak along to turn the houses into castles and the swimming pools into moats.

All I keep thinking is, what a gyp it is to have to go into the hospital on your birthday.

Finally I get there and I see the Fair Gwen's car in the visitor parking lot, but Grim says I should leave her alone and let her tend to her son, so what I do is go around back to the medical research building and find this stupid little tree I can sit under.

I have that old ornithopter bird with me and

23.
The Empty Book
Freak the Mighty

I'm winding it up and flying it around. Figuring maybe Freak will get a chance to look out the window and see it flittering by, that's my plan, and I'm under that puny little tree messing with the bird until this guy mowing the lawn makes me move. So I wander around to the front of the hospital and that's when the Fair Gwen finds me.

"Maxwell!" she says, and she gives me this great big hug. A wet hug, because she's been crying. "Max, we've been looking all over for you. Kevin wants to see you. He's making quite a fuss about it and Dr. Spivak says it's okay, but just for a few minutes."

So the Fair Gwen takes me inside, and I figure we're heading for the medical research building, but instead we go into the regular hospital. "He's in the ICU," she says.

"So they're taking really good care of him?"
"They're doing their best, Max," she says.

The intensive care unit is this place where there are so many nurses, you can't hardly turn around without bumping into one, which I do as soon as we get there. Every patient gets a room alone, and there's all this electronic gear the Fair Gwen says is called "telemetry," which means when Freak sneezes, the nurses know about it before he can wipe his nose.

I'm not scared at all until I actually go into his room and see how small he looks on the bed. They've got him sitting up with all these tubes going into his arms and up his nose and Dr. Spivak is guarding him, she won't let me come too close.

"I thought no visitors was the best policy for now," Dr. Spivak says. "But what Kevin wants, Kevin gets."

Dr. Spivak is this small woman with short red hair and a real stern face, and it's like she's mad because Freak wants to see me, or because I'll break some of her precious equipment.

"That will be all," Freak says to her. "You are dismissed."

The thing is, his voice sounds funny. Not just faint and weak, but kind of whistley. Only when I get closer do I see he's got this weird little plastic button stuck in his neck.

"It's called a tracheotomy," he says, holding his finger against the button, which stops the whistling noise. "Standard procedure to facilitate breathing."

"Does it hurt?"
"No way," he says. "I think it's cool. Listen to this."

Then he plays with his finger against the button, making his throat whistle a tune, which he says is the theme from *Star Trek,* although you can hardly recognize it.

"So when do you come home?" I ask.

Freak can't move much the way they've got him set up in the bed, so he sort of shakes his eyes instead of his head. "I'm not coming home," he says. "Not in my present manifestation."
I go, “What?”

“The Bionic Unit is on red alert,” he says.

“Tonight they’ll take me down there for my special operation. The next time you see me, I’ll be new and improved.”

“I’m scared,” I say.

“Don’t be a moron,” he says. “You’re not the one having surgery.”

“I still wish they wouldn’t.”

“Don’t argue with me,” he says.

I have to lean close to hear him because his voice is so small and whispery.

He goes, “If you argue with me, I’ll get upset and they can tell on the telemetry. Then you’ll get in trouble.”

So I just stand there like a lump and don’t say anything for a while. I put the ornithopter on the foot of the bed, but I don’t think he notices.

“See that book on the table?” he asks.

He can’t point, but I see the book on the table.

“Open it,” he says.

The book reminds me of the dictionary he gave me for Christmas, except when I open it, all the pages are blank.

“That’s for you,” he says. “I want you to fill it up with our adventures.”

“Huh?”

“Write it down, dummy. I was going to do it, but now it looks like I’ll be busy getting used to my new bionic body. It’ll probably take me weeks just learning how to walk with long legs.”

I put the book down.
I go, “Poor Gwen? She’s not the one having the special operation.”

Grim and Gram just look at each other like they can’t believe I’m so dumb, and finally Gram says, “Maxwell, dear, make an effort to eat your vegetables.”

That night I put the empty book in the pyramid box for safekeeping, and for good luck.

The deal is, I’m not supposed to bother anybody at the hospital. Yeah, right, like me being there is going to screw things up. The way everybody is acting around here, you’re supposed to shut up and not do anything but wait, which makes me crazy.

So early the next morning when Grim is still snoring loud enough to rattle the windowpanes, I get up and sneak out of the house. The way I figure, I can check on Freak and be back in time for breakfast, no harm done.

It doesn’t work out like that, to say the least.

The sun is just coming over the millpond and there’s this spooky mist on the water. You can hear all the frogs making a racket under the lily pads and the mosquitoes sound like bullets whizzing by and I have to kind of slap and run until I get clear of that smelly old pond.

Moving fast, like the sun is chasing my heels, I’m running down this long faint shadow of me...
that stretches out ahead, you can't ever catch up with it.

I'm thinking with my feet, like the rest of me is still asleep.

Not that I'm completely alone. There's this one old guy, he's actually out cutting his lawn, he's got these headlights rigged up on his rider mower, and he's wearing pajamas, too, like it's normal, everybody does it.

When I get to the hospital the streetlights are just starting to click off. The lobby is empty and there's nobody at the desk to tell me I can't be visiting patients at the crack of dawn.

There are plenty of nurses in the ICU, though, and they see me coming. This one woman runs right out from behind the telemetry station and she's got her hands up to her mouth and I'm pretty sure she's trying to shush me, even though I'm not making any noise.

She's not telling me to be quiet, though, she's saying, "Oh, my God, you must be Maxwell," even though she's never seen me before in her life.

I go, "Is Kevin back yet?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," she says.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Oh dear," she says. "Oh dear."

Now more nurses are coming out of the ICU.

One of them is the one I accidentally bumped into yesterday and when she sees me, she goes, "Better page Dr. Spivak, Kevin was her patient."

That's when I notice that some of the nurses are crying and looking at me strange and all of a sudden I just go nuts.

Just go nuts.

I'm saying, "No way! No way!" and this nurse is trying to throw a hug on me and I push her away.

Then I'm running down the hall and it's like I'm Kicker again, ready to just blast anybody who dares touch me, and I have to keep running, I'm skidding around the corners and bumping into walls and no one can touch me even if they're brave enough to try, I just keep running and running until I get to these glass doors that say Medical Research.

The doors are locked and it's dark inside.

Behind me people are shouting to call the guards, and I punch my hand right through the glass and I'm inside, skidding over broken glass through the dark, and I keep going until I come to this other set of doors.

No Admittance

No glass this time, they're solid so I can't punch through, and I'm kicking and kicking and slamming into the doors, and that's when all the hospital cops catch up with me.

A bunch of them jump on me and I keep going, running around in circles like an accident of nature until finally there are so many of them on me, I can't stand up anymore.

They're putting handcuffs on my wrists and my ankles and they're sitting on me and going, "We'll have to medicate him," and this one cop
Freak the Mighty

says, "With what, an elephant gun?"

That's how Dr. Spivak finds me, covered with cops. She's this worried face leaning down. Her eyes are red and blurry and she's saying, "I'm sorry, Maxwell, we did our best. Better let me bandage up that hand, you're bleeding."

"He believed you," I say. "You said you could give him a new body and he believed you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The special operation," I say. "The Bionics Unit."

Dr. Spivak makes the cops let me up and says she'll be responsible, but they leave the handcuffs on me just in case, and the cop who was talking about needing an elephant gun has this nightstick out and he's ready to bop me if I make a move.

Dr. Spivak sighs and says, "Somebody get me a coffee, please," and then she looks at me and goes, "you'd better tell me all about it."

So while she's bandaging up my hand, I tell her about how Freak has been coming to the medical research lab every few months to get fitted for his new bionic body, and Dr. Spivak's face goes soft and she nods to herself and says, "Well, that explains it."

"It was all a lie, wasn't it?" I say. "You were just telling him that so he wouldn't be scared."

"You know better than that, Maxwell. You couldn't lie to Kevin. I tried a little fib on him when he was about seven years old, because I didn't think a child could handle the whole truth, and you know what he did? He looked his disease up in a medical dictionary."

That's when I know she's telling the truth. Freak and his dictionary.

"Kevin knew from a very young age that he wasn't going to have a very long life," she says. "He knew it was just a matter of time."

"So he was lying about getting a robot body?"

Dr. Spivak is shaking her head. "I don't think it was a lie, Maxwell, do you? I think he needed something to hope for and so he invented this rather remarkable fantasy you describe. Everybody needs something to hope for. Don't call it a lie. Kevin wasn't a liar."

"No," I say. "But what happened to him really?"

"I could tell you all the medical terminology," she says. "But what finally happened is his heart just got too big for his body."

There was talk about arresting me for busting up the hospital — the cop with the nightstick was in favor — but finally they released me into the custody of Grim.

On the way home he goes, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Just leave me alone," I say.

"You got it," he says.
25. What Loretta Said

That was a year ago.

I hid in the down under for days and days and kept the door closed, which is why I missed the funeral and the Fair Gwen going away. Gram told me about it afterwards, how she couldn't stand to live in the house with Kevin gone, and who could blame her?

Grim threatened to unscrew my bedroom door but he never did, he just kept saying I should come out for Gram's sake, and sometimes she'd come down and say I should come out for Grim's sake, and so on and so forth until finally I gave up and came out.

I don't know if this makes sense, but for a long time I felt like I was a balloon and somebody had let the air out of me. I didn't care if I ever got the air back, because what does it really matter if we're all going to die in the end?

That's how down I was feeling, and sorry for myself. Grim tried to tell me it isn't how long you've got matters, it's what you do with the time you have, but that sounded so lame and puny next to Freak dying that I just didn't want to hear it.

This one day just before school was supposed to start I was moping around the back yard and thinking again how pointless and stupid everything was and Grim comes over and says, "You know what? Most of us go all the way through life and we never have a friend like Kevin. So maybe you should count yourself lucky."

"Yeah, right," I say.

"Suit yourself," he says. "But let's get one thing straight. You're going back to school if I have to hitch a rope to the bumper and drag you there, is that clear?"

So I went and I hated every minute of it, and I especially hated how people kept feeling sorry for me, as if it was me who died.

Finally one time even Tony D. came up to me and said it was a shame what happened, and I could see that he really meant it, and I just blew up and told him if he ever felt sorry for me again, I'd put him headfirst in the millpond and pound him down into the mud like a fence post. So we're enemies again, which is just the way I like it.

Not too long after that — this was winter by then — I saw Loretta Lee in the street. She still had on the neck brace and you could smell booze on her breath, but what do you expect, a miracle just because she lost her head and acted good for a couple of minutes?
Anyhow, Loretta sees me and she says, "Did you hear about Gwen? She’s in California and she’s got a new boyfriend. His name is Rick and they’re crazy about each other, ain’t that good news?"

"I guess so."

"Take it from me," she says, "it is. So what are you doing these days?"

"Nothing."

She gives me this long look and she goes, "Nothing is a drag, kid. Think about it."

I thought about it all the way home.

That night I pulled the pyramid box from under the bed and got the empty book out of the pyramid and I’m thinking, who are you kidding, Maxwell Kane, you haven’t got a brain, and that’s the truth, the whole truth, the unvanquished truth is how Freak would say it.

So I wrote the unvanquished truth stuff down and then kept on going, for months and months, until it was spring again, and the world was really and truly green all over. By the time we got here, which I guess should be the end, I’m feeling okay about remembering things. And now that I’ve written a book who knows, I might even read a few.

No big deal.